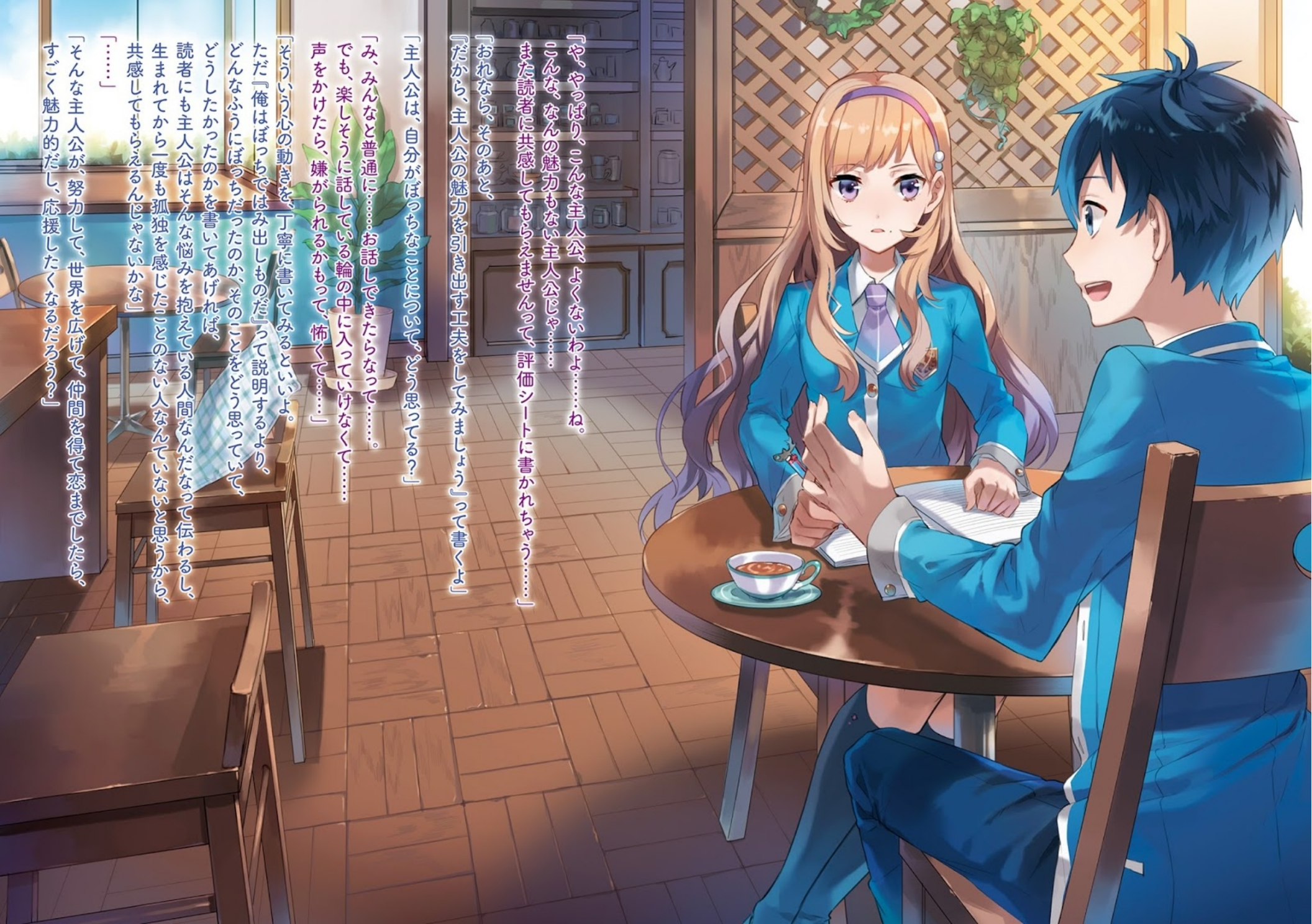
下読み男子と投稿女子
～優しい空が見た、内気な海の話。
著 野村美月
ill. えいひ
ファミ通文庫

下読み男子と投稿女子
～優しい空が見た、内気な海の話。


「や、やっぱり、こんな主人公、よくないわよ……ね。
こんな、なんの魅力もない主人公じゃ……
また読者に共感してもらえませんって、評価シートに書かれちゃう……」
「おれなら、そのあと、
『だから、主人公の魅力を引き出す工夫をしてみましょう』って書くよ」
「主人公は、自分がぼっちなことについて、どう思ってる？」
「み、みんなと普通に……お話しできたらなって……。
でも、楽しそうに話している輪の中に入っていけなくて……
声をかけたら、嫌がられるかもって、怖くて……」
「そういう心の動きを、丁寧に書いてみるといいよ。
ただ『俺はぼっちではみ出しものだ』って説明するより、
どんなふうにぼっちだったのか、そのことをどう思っていて、
どうしたかったのかを書いてあげれば、
読者にも主人公はそんな悩みを抱えている人間なんだなって伝わるし、
生まれてから一度も孤独を感じたことのない人なんていないと思うから、
共感してもらえるんじゃないかな」
「……」
「そんな主人公が、努力して、世界を広げて、仲間を得て恋までしたら、
すごく魅力的だし、応援したくなるだろう？」

読むのは好きか？
青？
うん！　大好きだ！
青がやっているのは、ライトノベルの新人賞の、一次選考の下読みだった。
商業作品として出版されているものとは、あきらかに違う。
言葉足らずな文章、強引な展開、
性格がころころ変わるキャラクター、延々と続く無駄な会話。
（だけど、おもしろい）
文章の拙さに素朴さを感じ、
展開の荒々しさに爽快感を覚え、
一貫性のないキャラクターにくすりとし、
ストーリーに絡まない日常会話の連続に、
友達がだらだら話している言葉に耳を傾けているような、
ほっこりした気分を味わった。

「風谷くんは……とても……広い人だわ」
「昴がシアンを好きになったのは、何故だと思う？」
「独りでいたとき、見つけてくれたから」
「親切にして、助けてくれたから」
「人気者で、明るくて、優しくて……笑顔が……青空みたいだから」

下読み男子と投稿女子

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エピローグ

Chapter 1: The Best Job In the World

“Ao, do you like to read?”

“Yes! I like it very much!”

And so, Ao started working secretly.

It happened when the summer vacation of his 2nd year in middle school was ending, filled with the sound of noisy cicadas.

Three years later…

“For this year’s golden week vacation, I will be following my female sempai from the light music club and hold outdoor concert tours.”

“I will be going camping with the people I met at a Group date! There’s a girl I want to woo there, I will work hard!”
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_dating#Japan>

“That’s nice. My parents found some friends on a hot spring website, so I will be forced by my family to go along for a hot spring trip. I am already in high school, but I still need to listen to my dad give his sermon on his hot spring cult. It feels so hollow. I want to go out with my friends some times too.”

“... I will be going to an amusement park, an aquarium and watching a movie with my girlfriend.”

“What!? You damn normie! And why are you frowning, making a ‘dates are such a hassle’ expression!? You hate dating?”

“Damn it, I want a girlfriend too! I want to have an intimate date with my girlfriend over the golden week!”

The day before school breaked for golden week, in the 2nd year 1st class of Kanotori high school, everyone was passionately discussing their vacation plans.

“What are your plans, Ao?”

When he heard his classmate’s question, Ao Kazetani who was putting his textbooks into his bag answered cheerfully:

“Me? I will be relaxing at home.”

The classmates who were discussing in high spirits suddenly fell silent, then everyone spoke a little panickingly:

“Is that so? That’s great, chilling out at home is good too.”

“That’s right, I can clear my backlogs of DVD, or marathon my video games, that’s awesome.”

Everyone chipped in.

The classmates Ao just got acquainted with in April were all good considerate people.

“Yup, I am looking forward to it.”

Ao shouldered his backpack with a refreshing smile.

“Well then, see you after the vacation!”

Ao ran out of the classroom with a wave.

That’s right, I will be relaxing at home during the golden week to do something enjoyable!

As Ao rode on his bike, the wind carried the fragrance of budding plants to him. With a smile, he passed through the rows of cherry blossom trees, and opened the door of a normal, two storey residence.

“I’m home!”

He sound excited.

“You are back Ao, the publisher mailed the items over.”

His mother poked her head out from the kitchen.

“Thanks Mom!”

Ao answered enthusiastically, his eyes already on the carton boxes piled besides the entrance. There were three boxes! Every one of

them was stuffed to the brim, making the box bulge. The plain brown cardboard boxes seemed to be emitting a quiet and holy aura. The corners of Ao’s mouth rose as he looked at them with sparkling, eager eyes.

A mixture of reverence and anticipation filled his chest, he felt as if he was setting off for an unknown adventure.

Ao took off his shoes nimbly while standing, and with his backpack still on his shoulders, he lifted one of the boxes. It was as heavy as it looked. It was heavy for Ao’s slender arms, as he carried the boxes to the stairs and climbed slowly. When he reached his room, he turned the door handle while carrying a box, bumped it open with his lean shoulder and entered. With a thud, he put the box and his bag down onto the carpet and panted happily. He then walked downstairs and carried the other two boxes to his room in the same way.

Three boxes were placed side by side in his room, and Ao looked at them with a sanctified anticipation.

“Alright.”

He muttered to himself energetically and opened the first box.

A delivery manifest with the words ‘Thirteenth Paradise Publishing Newcomer Contest Manuscript (No. 220~240)’ was pasted onto the box. Ao tore off the tape that sealed the edges of the bulging box and opened it. In the box were piles of manuscript in paper bags or postal packages. All of them had been opened.

Recently, a lot of publishers were taking the manuscripts from the letters and sent just the manuscripts over. Some times, if the contest only accept online submission, the publisher would print the manuscripts before shipping it to Ao.

The job he took from the publisher last month sent him a laptop to read the manuscripts. The softcopy of the submissions were already installed inside, and he could continue judging the works even if he wasn’t home. Such an arrangement was really convenient, and he felt touched by the improvement in technology.

This reading method that was at the forefront of technology wasn’t bad, but Ao still preferred doing things this way. Looking at the piles of manuscripts with varying size and formatting was like looking at the expression of the authors themselves. A submitter from middle school used tiny fonts to fill a B5 paper with words probably did so to save money due to their limited allowance. This made Ao smile.

Of course, the font being too small would make it hard to read, even if the story was a master piece. Invariably, it would lead to the screener focusing on making out the words and affect the judgement. That would be a pity, so it would be better to print it in a easy to read font size.

First, Ao took out the A4 size envelope printed with the publisher’s company name and extracted the letter.

‘**To all screeners,**

Memo on the first stage of the Thirteenth Paradise Publishing Newcomer

Contest’

The rest of the letter listed points of emphasis, the rough number of submission to advance past the first stage, and the way to fill in the screening comment.

There was also a sample screening comment, the serial numbers of the submissions in the box, a list of the author name and manuscript titles.

His heartbeat increased when he saw the list of titles, and Ao’s expectation reached its peak in an instant.

‘*After Dying and Going to Hell, Five Brides are Waiting for Me’, a normal title, but it makes me want to read it. ‘A Pearl at the End of the Universe’, probably a science fiction story, feels atmospheric and nice, like a work that will move the readers to tears. ‘The Lamb-Like Girl (Shaggy)’ is a touching romantic comedy right? I want to read it! ‘Tale of the Genius in the Closed Room’, a catching and direct title, this must be a detective story. ‘Arriving in the Third Alternate World, Getting my Third Girlfriend, the Me who is Lonely, Sensitive and Possess ESP’, looks interesting.*

The variety of imaginative stories made Ao smile.

Ao was screening the submissions for the first stage of the Newcomer Light Novel Contest.

There were all sorts of definition for light novels, but normally, it referred to books with manga style covers and illustration, light reading material that targeted teenage readers. In the past ten years, the number of light novel publishers had been increasing at an

explosive speed, with over a hundred new books being sold in retail shops every month. They were marketed either to men or women, with over twenty serializations focusing exclusively on publishing light novels.

Most of the serializations include a Newcomer contest, and the number of submissions increased annually. The number of submission for one such contest even broke one thousand before.

And of course, the famed authors at the last stage of the selection process couldn’t read all the manuscripts. That was why 90% of the manuscript would be screened out, and 10% of the submissions would progress to the second stage. The ratio was about one out of ten. This ratio changed depending on the serialization. If there was a need to let more works pass through to the second round, they could make some adjustments. Allowing two out of ten to progress to the second round-- or on very rare occasion, opening the flood gate by allowing three to make it through.

The manuscript that made it through the first round would be passed on to the second round of screeners. Many publishers let their editors take charge of this part. And last of all, the third and final round of selection would determine the works that wins the contest.

Ao was responsible for the first stage of selection. The one with the most quantity and the lowest quality.

Screeners include current authors working in the publisher, authors from other fields, staff from the editorial support department, people working in related industries that were introduced to them, and

housewives who were professional readers.

However, Ao was probably the only screener who was not an author, editor or work in related industries, but was just a normal highschool boy.

Ao first learned about the existence of the light novel screening job, and earned money doing so three years ago – during his second year middle school summer vacation.

It happened one afternoon when August was almost over, he visited his uncle who lived in a condo diagonally across from his home.

— Uncle Saku, I finished the book you lent me. Please lend me new ones.

Sakutaro was the younger brother of Ao's mother, and was twenty nine years old then. He formed a club that made a R18 visual novel when he was in school, which received rave reviews after distributing it by word of mouth. After being held back for four years, he quit the university and opened his own company, beginning to work on game production seriously. The first project received even better reviews, and was rewritten into an anime twice. From the sound of this, he seemed to be a talented individual full of drive and passion. However — leaving Sakutaro's talent aside, whenever Ao brought the dishes his mother made for his uncle, this was the scene he saw: empty packets of instant noodle cups, energy bars and pudding strewn all over. Manga or DVD with erotic covers were piled messily in the room, and a terrible adult with dishevelled hair was lying on the floor, grabbing his head and mumbling something.

“Why is there a deadline, I can’t think of anything. Ahh, I will just watch the latest DVD of the ‘slutty teacher series’, or continue playing ‘Conquest! Haime Harem’—”

Ao’s mother was troubled, and complained: “That child made it into a national university education major, but he dropped out after four years, and even started making games that needs mosaic. Since he has the qualification to be a high school teacher, he should enter the workforce normally and be a teacher.”

“Don’t ever give the games you made to Ao. Ao, close your eyes when you visit Uncle Saku, don’t look at those obscene things.”

His mother even made unreasonable demands.

Ao visited Sakutaro’s home to play frequently ever since he was a kid.

Aside from being nearby, Sakutaro was a knowledgeable, cheerful, and manly person, if there wasn’t any deadline. Ao liked him, and more importantly, Sakutaro had many books in his house.

Be it mangas with naked woman doing H stuff or the nude album of famous celebrities recommended by Sakutaro, Ao was interested in all of these, and frequently flipped through the pages with a red face and racing heart. But what drew Ao’s attention the most, were the light novels that had a cute heroine and a cool male protagonist on the cover.

Ao loved to read, and would finish the national language and history

text book for the school year the day he got them. All the literary works in the school library, foreign science fiction and detective books he could find had been were already read. Every one of them was interesting.

The first time he read light novels in Sakutaro’s place, he found it more endearing compared to other books, as if it was tailored for him. The main characters were almost always high schoolers, dialogues were written like how he would speak in everyday life, which resonated with Ao. The content of the novels were subjects he was interested in and he always felt the stories were written just for him.

Also, the story setting was very liberal. Anything could happen in the world of light novels.

For example, a normal highschool boy might be chosen to be the hero who saves the world, fighting continuous superpower battles with formidable enemies before winning the day. Extraordinarily beautiful angels might visit without any notice, forcefully staying at the side of a depressed middle schooler to be his wife. Such stories that suspended belief yet felt surprisingly real appeared in light novel easily. It made the readers believe that this was just how the world was. The entire cast of characters were vivid and full of personality.

— Uncle Saku, this book is really interesting.

Ao sat on the floor with a mountain of books he had finished reading growing taller and taller, and spoke with sparkling eyes.

— Is that so, that’s a light novel.

— Light novel?

— Yes, ライトノベル, short for ‘novels that are light and can be read easily’.

Sakutaro told him with a big smile. Ao who plunged himself right in was probably very happy.

Ao repeated the term he just learned in his head excitedly, then said firmly:

— I like light novels!

Sakutaro’s smile widened.

“Is that so? Then read more. You can read any of the books at my place, you can borrow any book you like.”

He even recommended some series to Ao. “These are the most famed works of the famed. You can start reading this one from the third volume. There is an unexpected development from this chapter, the ending will make you wail. The fight scene here is thrilling, images will appear in your mind one after another. The heroine Kana in this series is really moe, a heroine I will forever love.” And so on.

Ao had a lot of fun chatting endlessly with Sakutaro about light novels. Whenever he was free, Ao would visit Sakutaro’s place to read light novels.

As the boss of a game company, and wearing the hats for business operations, writing and project management, Sakutaro was very busy and often fell into slumps.

“I don’t want to write anymore! I haven’t bathed in five days, staring at the monitor all day is inhuman! Ahh, I’m going to quit and live like a man.”

Sakutaro grabbed his head and mumbled every now and then.

When Ao encountered such a situation, he would carefully leave the dishes he brought , borrow some books and exit quietly. The next time he returned with the book he finished reading, he would see his uncle leaning back on his chair cheerfully saying: “The script this time is a masterpiece! A bit erotic but not too much, and it will move you to tears even though it is lewd. Well? Oh no, I am really a genius, the players will definitely rave over this game.”

The summer when Ao was in his second year of middle school.

That day, Sakutaro was in his decadent mode, wearing a wrinkled shirt with messy hair and an unshaven face. After fulfilling all three decadent factors, he collapsed on the floor and grumbled:

— Why does everyone stuff their problems to me? The me from a week ago who said with a cool face ‘leave it to me!’, drop dead. Ahhhh, absolutely impossible! I have tons of tasks to settle, I won’t make it in time. I don’t care about screening manuscripts, just die!

— Uncle Saku, I will put the Chikuzenni and the avocado salad in the

fridge. I will be borrowing some books too.
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chikuzenni>

Ao spoke as he took new light novels from the shelf and piling the books onto his arms.

— Ao~ don't you have homework~ summer vacation would be over in five days right~

A grudgeful voice came from behind him.

— You are probably busy~ now isn't the time to read light novels~

I'm being chased so much, you should have a taste of the pressure too. Sakutaro turned his pupils towards Ao while lying on the floor, saying with a tone that expressed what he was thinking. Ao spoke apologetically:

— Sorry Uncle, I have only one physics paper left.

Hearing Ao's answer, Sakutaro opened his mouth wide and sat up with a start.

— What! Middle schoolers nowadays don't have vacation home work any more? Your homework is just one paper?

— There were others. Fifteen Physics papers, fifteen National Language papers, fifteen Social Studies papers, a booklet of questions for English and Mathematics respectively, one free research paper and a book report.

— You finished all that?

— Yes. I just needed to do one book report, but I did three.

Seeing Sakutaro’s face twist from despair, Ao felt guilt stricken and lowered his head. At this moment, Sakutaro banged his head against the floor loudly.

— Ahh, my blood related nephew, a model student who planned all his work, how annoying. Damn it, we read mountains of light novel at my place every day, but you still have time to do your homework, that’s cheating.

Sakutaro complained unreasonably, then got up in a hurry all of a sudden.

— Hey, Ao.

When his uncle called out to him, Ao who was carrying a bunch of light novels in both hands stood up straight on reflex as Sakutaro was making a serious expression.

He stared at Ao as if he was evaluating him and narrowed his sharp eyes. Sakutaro then shut his mouth as if he was thinking about something…

Showing a very gentle expression, he then asked in a warm voice:

— Ao, do you like reading?

— Yes! I like it very much!”

Ao answered with a smile instinctively.

Because to him, this wasn’t something he needed to consider.

Sakutaro smiled widely.

— Can you type with a keyboard?

— I learned that in school.

— Can you type without looking at the keyboard?

— I’m not too bad at it.

— That’s good enough. Ao, want to try working on a job? It’s a job where you can make money by reading light novels.

— Huhhhh!?

Ao was at a loss.

Making money by reading light novels, how could such a great job exist?

Ao remembered the advice his mother always mentioned, telling him to not be tricked and take an evil path like his Uncle Saku.

— Uncle Saku, that’s fraud.

If this wasn’t fraud, then maybe his Uncle was losing his mind because of the deadline. Sakutaro smiled in response to Ao’s words.

— No, you just don’t know that there really is such a job.

Sakutaro stood up, and carried a cardboard box that seemed really heavy over, and place it before Ao with a thud.

— Open it and take a look.

Ao opened the box doubtfully, and it was full of opened paper packages, with the following words written on it:

‘**Forward from: Eidansha Publishing**

To: 25th Star Literature Newcomer Contest Department’

These words entered Ao’s eyes abruptly.

Newcomer Contest!

Ao knew that light novel publishers would hold periodic Newcomer Contests for Manuscripts submissions. The end of books would include the steps to submit your entry, and the jacket of the book would have the word ‘Prize winning’ on it. When Ao read such award winning works, he would always be moved by the fresh ideas and vivid words.

And the manuscript of such entries were right before Ao now!

Just the thought that the winning manuscript might be inside made Ao’s body heat up, and his heart race.

— Read the entries, judge if they can be passed to the next stage of selection, this job is known as ‘screening’. As I am always strapped on funds for my projects, this lets me earn a quick buck and understand the wishes of the players by seeing what the current fads are, killing two birds with one stone. So I told an editor I am familiar with: “If you have any manuscript screening jobs, give them to me, I am fine with any number of manuscripts, and I will finish by the deadline.” It’s great that I got the job, but my actual game production job is reaching its deadline soon, so I don’t have the mood nor the time to read them.

Sakutaro said as he stared intensely at Ao, then clap his hands together and pleaded.

— Ao, please read them for me, I will give you the entire pay for this job.

Seeing his Uncle bow his head, Ao finally came to his senses and said in a panic:

— Huh, but I am just a middle schooler, Is it fine for me to take the job Uncle Saku accepted? Wouldn’t the publisher staff get angry?

— It will be fine if we don’t tell them. And I am only asking because it is you. You read all the books in my backlog, and when I ask for your review, I feel that you understood it better than me. It is impressive, so I feel that Ao can definitely do it. Ah, you will need to fill in a comment sheet after screening the manuscripts, but only the stories

that made it to the second stage will receive a comment letter written by the editors, so what you write won’t be posted to the submitters. It will just be for internal reference, so write whatever comes to mind, I will read through all of them before I send it to the publisher.

— Comment sheet?

— Look, this is a comment sheet. The only part you need to write is the overall review box, this is the type that is the easiest to fill in. With different serializations, there are some that requires minimum word count for each part, such comment sheets are common too.

Sakutaro showed Ao a sample comment sheet, divided into story, character settings, writing, originality and commercial potential, with a grade of A to C for each part. There was an ‘overall review’ column at the very bottom, and needed to be filled in with specific critiques. At the very top was a box marked ‘overall’, manuscript needed a grade from A to B+ to progress to the next round of selection.

The standards for grading was stated on the sample. A was works that had the potential to be published, A- and B+ had issues, but were still charming works.

The manuscripts of the Newcomer Contest seems interesting, I really want to read them. But letting a middle schooler take on the job meant for Uncle Saku doesn’t sound fine. Filling a comment sheet isn’t like a book report. It is too pitiful for the manuscript someone wrote with all their effort to be read by a middle schooler. There might be masterpieces among the manuscript filtered out by me, which might not make the cut because of my poor judgement.

Ao rejected Sakutaro, but Sakutaro said:

— I understand, then help me categorize them: Manuscript that definitely won't make it to the second stage of selection, and those that might make it to the second stage! Just doing that would be a big help! I will read the manuscripts that Ao can't judge.

Urged by Sakutaro's desperate pleas, Ao started reading the manuscripts.

In actual fact, even though he was filled with unease and guilt, Ao still wanted to read the box full of manuscripts.

And once he start reading, he completely lost track of time.

Compared to published works, there were really huge differences.

Ambiguous writing, forced events, characters with ever changing personality and unnecessary naggy dialogue.

But, this is really interesting.

He could feel the simplicity in the clumsy word usage. The disorderly stories felt refreshing. The inconsistent character setting made him laugh. Chunks of chit chat unrelated to the story was like listening to his friends complain, which gave him a warm feeling.

These manuscripts are so interesting.

He had never read such incomplete and chaotic novels that made him

want to retort so much! Such flawed, messy, wilful, full of loophole stories that looked like a pirated version influenced by other famous works, were impossible to publish. But they were filled with passion that was hard to describe with words. He didn’t know such stories existed in the world!

It is full of flaws, but is very interesting.

Ao used the laptop and filled in the comment sheet: Story C, Character setting B, Writing C, Originality C, Commercialization B, Overall C+. C was work with obvious problems, B was entries with some standard.

The basis for judging if a work can make it to the second stage was very clear. This manuscript couldn’t make it. It had not matured as a work yet. Was there a chance it would be in the future? It was hard to answer yes too. Now wasn’t the time to fool around. Cliche setting and messy story development, it was just an old story with cosmetic changes.

But, why is it so interesting?

I saw this setting just now too! The heroine had blonde twin tail and cat-like eyes. The way she cross her arms is just like the heroine I read earlier! When reading this manuscript, there wasn’t the annoying emotion of ‘This again!?’, but an excited ‘She is here again!’.

Reading unfinished novels was so exhilarating.

What will I read next? And the next? And after that?

Ao couldn’t stop, and took one manuscript after another to read.

He sat on the floor littered with the jelly nutrition packages, then took a pile of paper with a large clip on right side of the pages. Ao thought anxiously: *The words are hard to read, I will flip the pages the best I can without taking the clip out.* He then read on.

When he started reading the fifth manuscript, Ao was surprised in a different way than before.

This person is amazing!

The first few lines made Ao open his eyes wide. If he was enjoying the clumsy music performed by primary schoolers earlier, admiring their childish movements and determined expression, then this was like an adult performer showing up, and playing his instrument smoothly with a cool expression.

The writing is clear, and the choice of words are on point, leaving an impression in the minds of the reader quickly. Wahh, I like this rhythm. The characters didn’t have strong personalities and felt strange in some places, but the heroine is plain and cute.

He was impressed until the last page, Ao mumbled to himself as he finished the work and gave an A overall grading without any hesitation.

Ah, I read a great piece!

‘I really want the second stage screener to read this work. No, I want

more people to read it. It isn’t perfect, and the structure of the story is a bit hard to catch, but these can be improved immediately. Compared to the great charm of the story itself, these flaws are nothing.’ Ao wrote on the comment sheet. He felt elated to award an A grade and was all smiles. He finally noticed at this moment.

It was dark outside.

Ao arrived at Sakutaro’s place just after noon, and the clock on the wall displayed a time of 10pm!

He read for almost ten hours.

His feet were numb, stomach was rumbling and his eyes were tired. Even so, he was feeling very excited. When he heard Sakutaro said: “I contacted your mom, and told her you will be staying the night here.” Ao suddenly relaxed.

— Thank… Thank you.

Ao answered.

Because Ao seemed so happy as he jumped right into reading the manuscripts, Sakutaro didn’t disturb him. He only asked him to rest and eat something once, then put some Chikuzenni and avocado salad onto plates, then put it on the floor with instant miso soup and biscuits.

While Ao was eating that, Sakutaro took a look at the laptop to check the comment sheet Ao wrote. Looking at Sakutaro’s tense face and

tight lips as he stared at the screen with scary eyes, Ao felt anxious, thinking that the comments written by a middle schooler wasn’t good after all. Or maybe something was wrong.

Sakutaro sighed.

— How discouraging…

When he heard Sakutaro mutter bitterly, Ao’s heart almost stop. *I can’t do it after all!* He apologized to Sakutaro: “I’m sorry, Uncle Saku.”

But Sakutaro—

— Damn, so this is being young? Ah! I want to go back to the time I was in middle school!

After yelling at the ceiling, he ruffled Ao’s hair.

— Instead of letting a tired old man like me read the manuscript, it would be better for you to do it. So carry on like this, I will leave the rest to you too. Thirty books in total, the deadline is five days later. Minus the postage time, please finish this in four days, twenty five books left.

Sakutaro sounded really energetic when he said that as he looked down at Ao with gentle eyes.

Back then, of the three submission Ao passed to the second stage screening, one only made it to the third stage of screening, another got a merit prize and the last one won the contest. Two prize winning

work being inside the set of thirty manuscripts when there were 600 submission was a rare occurrence, this might be the beginner’s luck.

Ao’s comments were also evaluated by the editorial department to be ‘detailed, easy to understand and kind to the participants’.

— After seeing the comment sheet, they actually told me: Saku-san, you are really a good guy. Damn it.

Sakutaro complained.

After that incident, Sakutaro passed all the screening job he got to Ao. He also told the editorial staff what actually happened through someone he knew at the company. In the beginning, only the editors read Ao’s comment sheet, but he later started writing comments that would be posted to the participants.

— Ao’s comments are regarded highly by the editorial department. They say that you are honest and have good judgement.

Ao felt happy when he heard Sakutaro say that, but how would the participants who receive the comments think? As he couldn’t ask them directly, Ao still felt worried.

In the beginning, Sakutaro looked through all the contents of the comment sheet, but he left it all to Ao now.

The workload for manuscript screening increased gradually, and Ao read them at a pace of 30 to 50 books a month. For longer breaks such as summer vacation, he could even screen a hundred novels in a

month.

Ao would read the manuscripts sent to Sakutaro’s house in the beginning, but he spent too much time at Sakutaro’s place and either returned late or stayed the night. This made Ao’s mother suspicious, and she barged right into Sakutaro’s place, asking Sakutaro whether he was leading Ao astray.

They explained the entire situation honestly, and received permission from Ao’s mother: “Hmm… Since you are not helping Sakutaro make those erotic games, it’s fine… But you must do your homework!”

And so, the manuscripts were sent to Ao’s house directly.

That’s why he could put the cardboard full of manuscripts into his own room, and read it as much as he wanted.

Ao planned to read the manuscripts happily for this golden week too, so he took on fifty manuscripts. Two of the boxes should have twenty, and the last box should have ten.

How many manuscripts should be put inside a box was dependent on the serialization too. Some would pack ten into a small box that was just right for the size, while others would squeeze in manuscripts to the verge of bursting open. If they used small boxes, it would fill the entire room with cardboard boxes. As for the boxes that were stuffed to the brim, Ao couldn’t bring it up to his room on the second floor alone unless he took some of the manuscripts out, which was time consuming. Anyway, there were pros and cons to each method.

But the thrill of opening a cardboard box didn’t change for these three years. When he saw the list of titles, his chest thumped with excitement.

He took out a heavy stack of A4 paper from the already opened envelope.

There wasn’t any restriction on the formatting for this serialization, and the words would generally be printed on a 20 by 20 manuscript paper. In such case, there would be plenty of space around the side, the spacing between the words and the lines were adequate, making this easy to read layout the best. But some contestants would use excessive A4 paper, resulting in the spacing between words to be too big. The worst would be using ‘manuscript printing’ function to print on blank paper. That would make the spacing between every single word too wide, and would be difficult to read
<TL: manuscript paper looks like this http://www.tenkoo.asia/GenkouFormatExpress/images/GenkouFormat.jpg>

For example.

‘Harumare is a beautiful girl.’

If the font was like this, reading it would be smooth, but—

‘Harumare is a beautiful girl.’

Each word would be an individual term, and it would be hard to register in one’s mind.

It would be a pity if a manuscript that could be read smoothly became difficult to read because of formatting issues.

Recently, an increasing number of contests encourage the participants to submit entries online, and the editorial department would then print it out with uniform formatting. However, the first manuscript Ao got was a manuscript with overly wide spacing, something he had not seen in a while.

Ahh, such a pity.

He thought as usual, then glanced at the details of the contestant. The page after the cover include the pen name, real name, address, telephone, email, age, occupation and participating experience. Depending on the publisher, the manuscripts might not include such details. This involved the issue of privacy, and they wanted the screeners to read the manuscripts without any preconception.

Indeed, if a contestant was informed that they didn’t make it through the first stage of screening twenty times, the screener might think the author wasn’t ready yet. On the other hand, if the experience stated that they made it through the final stage of a newcomer selection, the screener might hold overly high expectations. If the screener felt that the work was just normal, it could affect his judgement and worry that another screener would approve it for the second stage. Thus, the screener might read the manuscript three more times to be sure.

That was why if participation history was included, it would be hard for the screener to judge the work purely on its own merit, and Ao was

aware of this danger.

However, Ao’s habit of reading the history and knowing who wrote the manuscript would make it easier to relate to the work, and Ao liked that feeling.

This story is written by a 27 years old freelancer. Five years of participation history, he made it through the first round of screening two years ago, and even passed the third round last year. Someone who worked hard steadily, it would be great if he gets good results.

Stuff like that.

This person is an X-ray technician in a hospital, his description of the hospital is really detailed.

Some were impressive.

Wah, this person is 73 years old! Older than my grandfather back home! Wah, it’s handwritten, the penmanship is beautiful!

On closer inspection.

Hmm, the address… is prison!

Some surprised him.

Occupation, warrior!? Huh? What in the world is his job?

Ao mumbled to himself happily. When he saw a familiar name,

Ohh! This is the sixth time I saw this person's manuscript. Ah, he didn't use the old manuscript he submitted to other Newcomer Contest, but a new work!

Sometimes, it made him feel overjoyed.

The manuscript in his hands right now was written by a 20 years old college student, entering the contest for the first time. This was probably the reason why he printed it in such a difficult to read format.

After browsing through the synopsis and understanding the setting, Ao started reading the content.

The writing was solid, he probably read a lot of literature. On the contrary, the character setting was conservative. A large number of character appeared in the beginning, and without describing the personality of the characters further, the story kept progressing, making it hard to figure out who was saying what.

Ehh, this is Morita? But that's Kondo here, and this… is Nikaidou right… But Nikaidou refer to himself as 'moi', not me? So, this is spoken by Kondo?

It was fun to deduce as he read like this too.

This felt like a story he wrote without planning it out first. The second half is much smoother and feels great. He gets it right rather fast. But the development of the story is too abrupt, he probably added the setting that just came to his mind in. Wahh, what is happening here? It doesn't match the previous part, that surprised me, how interesting.

Ao always felt excited when he read such yet to mature novel with plenty of plot holes, which warmed his heart. This had never changed since he first took the job of screener three years ago.

Ao felt that working as a screener was the most extravagant job in the world.

So there really is a job where you get paid to read stories. For the serialization Ao was working on right now, payment would be by the pages. Screening a 300 page manuscript and filling in the comment sheet would net him 3000 yen, some serialization would even offer a generous rate of 4000 yen.

If he finish 30 books in a month, he would get 80,000 yen after tax. In terms of salary for a high schooler, that was groundbreaking, and he could read at his own time.

Reading as if he was conversing with an unfinished manuscript was really enjoyable. He would come across manuscripts brimming with talent occasionally, which was evident after reading the opening lines. Ao would sit up straight on reflex with a heart full of respect.

The sparkling words, charming characters and amazing story structure would win him over, making him continue reading in silence. Seeing the overflowing talent of the contestant made Ao take a deep breath.

“Uwah, I read a great manuscript.”

Ao muttered.

“This submission will definitely win a prize, what kind of illustrations would it get, and what would the end product look like?”

He felt exhilarated just thinking about this.

Over the past three years, twenty manuscripts selected by Ao for the second round of selection won a prize. There weren’t two winners in one batch like his first try, but in one of the year, ten participants he selected won.

According to Sakutaro, some screeners who had been doing it for ten years didn’t even select one prize winner. It was rare to see someone with high production rate like Ao.

“The editors told me a while back that the manuscripts given an A grade by Saku-san and this screener have a high chance of winning a prize.” — Sakutaro said.

To Ao, manuscripts that had the potential of winning a prize would make it to the second round of screening no matter who the screener was. Ao didn’t feel that he had exceptional judgement, and merely selected the manuscript he really wanted to be published and read by everyone. It just happened that this work was packed into the box Ao was responsible for.

Ao felt that this was very lucky and not something to brag about. The manuscript he sent for the second round of selection making it through to the third round, becoming the prize winner of the year, get published into a book and sold in retail shops.

He would feel anxious as he waited for the judging to conclude. After confirming the list of prize winners via cell phone, he would yell “Awesome!” in his room and smiled happily.

He couldn’t stop smiling when he saw the prize winning work displayed on shelves in the book shops.

“Ao, what are you smiling about?”

Such situations baffled his friends.

And of course, Ao would purchase the winning works he came into contact with, and placed them carefully onto his book shelf. These twenty books were special works to Ao, even though he had never seen the authors before, Ao wanted to support them. *I am the first one to read the manuscript he submitted!* Ao took pride over this secretly.

After finishing the work by the college student who submitted an entry for the first time, Ao filled in the grades for each criteria on the comment sheet, and awarded an overall score of B-.

“He didn’t make it this time, but he has a lot of potential, I hope he keeps writing.”

With such thoughts in his mind, Ao completed the comment sheet, put the manuscript back in the envelope. He then reach for the next paper bag and took out the content.

It was a work titled ‘The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero, demon king and the emperor of a harem

paradise’.

“How direct! Amazing!”

Ao flip open the cover with a smile and confirmed the details of the author.

Pen Name: Sameyoroi

Real name—

“Huh?”

Ao locked his sights on the place where the name of a girl was written.

Real Name: Hiyuki Hyonomiya
<TL: Kanji means ‘Snow Icefort’>

With the ice character in her name and family name, one could almost hear the sound of the air freezing over, Ao remember this absolutely cold name.

Could it be…

Holding his breath, he checked the age and occupation.

Sixteen years old, studying in Kanotori high school

“!”

He forgot about breathing momentarily, and his heart pumped intensely.

It is that Hiyuki Hyonomiya!

What came to Ao’s mind was his classmate known as the ‘Ice Maiden’.

One week later, the day after the golden week ended.

Ao was chatting with a group of guys in his class.

“The concert was so high, it was awesome!”

“The hot spring was great too, my pimple faded and skin turned so smooth. Here’s some souvenoir, hot spring buns.”

“… I went out with my girlfriend every day, so tiring.”

“Why you! You’re doing it on purpose! You’re saying this intentionally to me who got dump by Soejima-chan during my camping trip!”

“Hey, get a hold of yourself. What are you looking at, Ao?”

Ao, who was looking into the distance from his seat besides the window, jumped.

“Hmm, ahh, nice weather today.”

He muddled it with a smile.

Actually, he was thinking about Hiyuki Hyonomiya. Hiyuki wasn’t in school yet, the third seat from the front besides the window was still empty.

“Ao stayed home the entire time?”

“Ah, yeah, it was fun.”

“Is that so? Here, have a hot spring bun.”

“I bought some chocolate at the souvenir shop near the camp site. Here, I will give you two as a special service.”

“Thank you.”

“… Want to see my girlfriend’s photo?”

“Stop that!”

As Ao’s classmates chattered noisily, it was almost time for morning self study. At this moment, a young girl with a cold aura about her entered the classroom’s front door.

It’s Hiyuki Hyonomiya! Her light brown hair that was different from a normal Japanese hung over her slender back and modest chest. Her limbs were long and she kept her back straight, standing tall with excellent posture, and she was taller than normal girls too. Her skin

was so pale it was almost transparent, which was probably because of her mixed heritage. Under her long lashes were lustrous eyes that emitted ice cold light. A small mole besides her thin lips looked really sexy, and the boys were always getting worked up over her.

She was a cool beauty who really suited the name Hiyuki Hyonomiya. Over time, everyone started calling her ‘Ice Maiden’.

Ao and Hiyuki were in different class last year, but Ao heard about the nickname and things related to Hiyuki.

He heard that she was from a wealthy family and lived in a Japanese style mansion near their school.

She lived together with her grandmother who always wore a kimono and kept her back meticulously straight. She was a graceful beauty, but she looked a bit scary and unapproachable, just like Hiyuki.

Hiyuki was a solitary person, even if someone talked to her, she would show a cold expression as if she was ignoring the existence of others. Even if she replied, she would do so with an icy tone. That was why no one spoke to her anymore.

Despite that, she wasn’t ostracized, and was revered by others as the ‘Ice Maiden’, becoming the envy of others. It was scary to be close to her, but watching from afar, she felt so beautiful, mature and enchanting.

After starting the second year and becoming her classmate, Ao also thought: *It’s Hyonomiya Hiyuki, what a beauty.* Like everyone else, he

thought the mole at the corner of her lips was very sexy.

“Hyonomiya is really sexy today too.”

“Those cold eyes, is she the fabled Queen-sama?”

“Ahh, I will get goosebumps if those eyes lay their gaze on me.”

“Are you a masochist? I won’t be able to take it, if those icy stares caught me. I will probably die.”

“…Hyonomiya won’t bother with you guys, don’t worry.”

“You are really annoying, normie!”

Hiyuki seemed unfazed by the conversations and gazes around her. She walked to her seat with composed and graceful movements, pulled her chair quietly, then sat elegantly.

Pulling the zipper on her bag, she took out her books and place them on her desk. Hiyuki didn’t greet anyone after entering the classroom. Her perfect profile that looked artificial was ice cold no matter what angle you looked at her.

“What is it Ao, you are staring so intently at Hyonomiya. Did you fall for her?”

Ao snapped back to reality after being asked so suddenly by his classmate. He had been staring at Hiyuki all this while, and was overdoing it.

“Eh, no, impossible. She is just a normal beauty to me.”

“Your face is red.”

“You guys got it wrong.”

Ao denied frantically.

He really didn’t love Hiyuki, that was not true.

Hyonomiya just entered the Newcomer Contest where I am working as a screener. How can I explain such a thing?

Ao himself was filled with doubt.

The day before golden week, Ao was very surprised when he saw the name Hyonomiya Hiyuki in the list of contestants. *Sixteen years old and studying in Kanotori high school, it really is that Hyonomiya Hiyuki*. When he confirmed this fact, he was dumbfounded.

The beautiful top student, the unapproachable Hiyuki known as the ‘Ice Maiden’, actually submitted a manuscript with the title ‘The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero, demon king and the emperor of a harem paradise’?

And from her submission history, Ao saw that this wasn’t her first attempt. Her first entry was in April last year, this was her fifth time. All prior attempts didn’t make the cut.

—— A-Anyway, let’s take a look at the content. Yup.

Feeling more tense in reading a manuscript than ever before, Ao flipped the pages.

He scanned the synopsis first. He could tell from the title that this was a transported to an alternate world story that was popular recently.

In the real world, the main character who didn’t have friends, wasn’t close to his family, had no good points about himself and was lonely, got into a traffic accident. When he woke up, he found himself in a world similar to Europe in the middle ages. At the request of that world’s residents, he defeated the demon king by taking on the role of a hero.

However, he knew he was also the resurrected demon king. With this secret in his heart, he built great relationships with the girls who made their appearance. A standard setting seen everywhere, but with the different writing style of each author, it could be spun into an interesting tale.

That Hyonomiya Hiyuki actually wrote a Harem Comedy…?

Ao turned the page with doubts in his mind, but was hit by greater confusion.

Bong——Bang!

That was the first line he read.

「*Uwah, I hit someone! Oh no! He is wearing a uniform! Just a* ***High Schooler****!*」

『***Beee－－ Boop－－Beee－－ Boop－－...***』

Ahh, that hurts, damn.

This is the junction before Shibuya 109, where the normies gather.

I collided with a high class black benz head on. As I bleeded to the verge of death, I could hear the sirens of the ambulance.

『***Beee－－ Boop－－Beee－－ Boop－－...***』

Tch, it's getting louder.

「*Hey, just hang on! The ambulance will be here soon!*」

The one who knocked me down looked like a CEO of some company, who is wearing an expensive Armani suit with a Hermes tie. An old man about fifty years of age, he kept calling out to me.

Sorry for colliding with you, old man. I didn't mean to, just think of me as a bug who happened to be in the way and forget about me.

The truth is, my life isn't any different from a bug.

No friends, no girl for me.

Ignored by my parents.

A super lonely person.

『Beee—— Boop——Beee—— Boop——…』

Pata!

Tatatata.

「「「「Where is the casualty?」」」」

I lowered my head weakly as the cries of the medical team sounded out.

Good bye, this grey world.

I am

dead.

「*Jang~ Jang jang jang, jang la, jang la la la la la ♪ (Funeral tune)*」
<TL: Actual text 1, actual text 2>

This is… by Hyonomiya-san!?

Ao didn’t object to the usage of varying font size, repeated punctuation and onomatopoeia as a mean to tell a story. He thought that anything was acceptable if it fit in with the work.

That’s why, there wasn’t anything wrong with changing the font size in this story.

This was a great writing style too.

But, just to ask again, this was written by that Hyonomiya Hiyuki?

Reading on, words in large fonts like ‘Fluffy’, ’Soft QQ☆’, ’Striped panties \(@^〇^@)/’ appeared before his eyes, but the mature and beautiful Hyonomiya Hiyuki with her cold gaze was on his mind. And so, Ao felt the world was spinning as he finally finished reading the story.

There must be a mistake, there's no way Hyonomiya-san would enter a light novel story contest.

Since self study begun, Ao continued to observe Hiyuki. Ao's seat was behind Hiyuki, two seats away. From this position, he could see Hiyuki's cold profile. A light gust of late spring breeze brushed Hiyuki's hair. Her white skin seemed transparent under the ray of the sun. Hiyuki kept her back straight as she stared at the blackboard. Her ice cold eyes were filled with maturity and calmness, her tightly closed lips gave an air of intellectuality. The mole besides her lips seemed so mature too.

Hyonomiya-san using a term like 'Bong—Bang'? Or getting excited because 'it's striped panties yay～○(≧▽≦)○' ? Or sticking her tongue out and knocking her head gently because 'my skirt rolled up accidentally, teehee☆'?

Ao had never seen Hiyuki smile.

The author wasn't equivalent to their work, Ao confirmed this from his uncle Sakutaro. He portrayed flat chest lolis as heroine and enamoured the heart of the players, but as an authority in this field, Sakutaro loved big breasts. His first girlfriend when he was in high school was an office lady in her twenties. He thought of other girls as brats, and didn't even think of them as women.

Also, Sakutaro's main heroines always wore strawberry print panties. Sakutaro would focus on writing the details of the strawberry panties as he mumbled: "Woman wearing panties with prints isn't good.

Panties have to be black, black! Ahh, how healing it would be if I could motorboat a 27 year old beauty’s large breasts—”

Also, the main characters in Sakutaro’s work didn’t know how to handle women, and always nosebleed with a blushed face before them. But that was totally different from Sakutaro himself.

That’s why, it wasn’t such a surprise if the impression Hiyuki gave was complete polar opposites from her work. But—

Maybe there is another Hyonomiya Hiyuki in school.

Such doubt arose within Ao.

Hyonomiya Hiyuki was probably not Sameyoroi who wrote ‘The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero, demon king and the emperor of a harem paradise’.

At this moment, the mechanical pencil in Hiyuki’s hand caught Ao’s eyes. The design was cute with a picture of a fish on it, and didn’t match the mature Hiyuki at all. The fish had a long and grey body, its most prominent feature was its eyes. Deep blue eyes, large and moist.

Hmm… Could that be… A shark?

Sameyoroi… Same, Yo, Ro, I… Same… Shark (Same)!
<TL: some word play with different kanji that has the same pronunciation.>

Linking everything together, Ao felt his head heating up. During the

break between classes, he used his smartphone to search for information about sharks.

He found a type of kitefin shark that lived at the depth of the sea, with eyes that had a blue glow, and looked really powerful.

Same, Yo, Ro, I, it's Yoroizame (Kitefin Shark)!

He's heart raced as if he discovered something incredible. Right now, Ao was very certain.

Hyonomiya Hiyuki is Sameyoroi!

"Uwah."

After uttering that unconsciously, Ao shut his mouth in a panic. He looked towards Hiyuki's seat and found it empty, she had went off to somewhere.

But he couldn't restrain the rumbling in his heart, and had the urge to shout it out loud.

And of course, he couldn't ask her directly 'Hyonomiya-san is Sameyoroi correct!' Ao had been reminded time and again: The personal information of the contestant, content of the work, results of the contest must never be leaked. On top of that, Ao also signed a contract with the publishers. It wouldn't be good if others found out that the high schooler Ao was working as a screener. Also, Hiyuki would be surprised if a classmate said that to her out of the blue.

But, I want to talk to Hyonomiya-san.

If he talked about light novels, she would be willing to chat, right? Some of the contestants lived near Ao too. It made Ao happy: Ahh, there's a 26 years old engineer who takes the bus at the same stop as me. The contestant this time wasn't just in the same school, they were in the same class too.

Caught in the dilemma of 'strictly prohibiting the leak of personal data' and 'hiding the fact that I am a screener and chatting with her', Ao couldn't keep still and was really troubled.

Hiyuki only came back to class when class was about to begin. She still didn't talk to anyone, returning to her seat and keeping her back straight.

She makes that ice sculpture like expression though she wrote lines like 'Striped panties'. How unfathomable.

When they were assigned to the same class, aside from thinking: "What a beauty", Ao wasn't interested in her. But now, he was very intrigued by Hyonomiya Hiyuki. *When did she start writing light novels? Why was she writing light novels? Was she writing any other works? Which author did she like? I want to know all that so much!*

During class, Ao kept peeking at Hiyuki's face.

When it was time for lunch break, Hiyuki took her small bag and left the class hurriedly.

That's right Hyonomiya-san is usually not in class during lunch break...

He remembered that she only made it back to her seat right before class begin.

"Hyonomiya-san is probably eating lunch with her friends in other class right?"

Ao gathered together with the boys in class and chatted while eating the lunch box his mother made for him.

"What, so you really do like Hyonomiya."

"Daring to woo that 'Ice Maiden', you are really a hero."

"Take my advice, it's better to not go after Hyonomiya."

Some laughed deviously, while others worried for Ao sincerely.

"I said that's not it. She is always not around during lunch break, I'm just curious where she went."

"If you didn't care about that girl at all, why would you be curious about that?"

"That's right. Ao, you have fallen for her right?"

That's not it, really.

Ao smiled wryly. His classmates shared what they knew about Hiyuki

with him.

“Every morning, afternoon and after school, Hyonomiya would shut herself inside the computer lab. I heard she stayed there all the time during her first year. She emitted an icy aura while glaring at the screen.”

“I saw it too, law and statutes, Marx’s economical theory and other such books were piled around the keyboard as she tapped on the keyboard with her body completely still. So scary, the seats around Hyonomiya are mostly empty.”

“When I first saw her, there were medical books, then philosophy books like those by Plato or Aristotle.”

“She might be thinking that it would be more meaningful to widen her knowledge than to talk with us.”

She is probably writing her manuscript in the computer lab.

Ao’s heart beat even faster.

Before the fifth period began, Hiyuki returned to the classroom and sat gracefully back in her seat.

From diagonally behind her, Ao watched Hiyuki’s cold eyes, tightly closed lips, the mole besides her lips and the Kitefin shark with large eyes on her mechanical pencil.

After school, Ao made a trip to the computer lab.

The computer lab on the third floor was usually open for the student usage. That was why many students visited the computer lab during break and after school. But as gaming and adult sites were banned, along with the ‘talking is prohibited’ poster in the room, only the sound of keyboards could be heard in the room.

Hiyuki came to the computer lab earlier and sat in a seat besides the wall, staring at the screen as she typed.

I see. Compared to her demeanour in the classroom, Hiyuki felt even more cold in the computer lab. That was why the seats around her were empty.

Ao intentionally picked a seat besides Hiyuki.

The tension in the room suddenly rose, probably because the students were spooked. They wondered who dared to sit besides the ‘Ice Maiden’.

Hiyuki didn’t even look at Ao and continued to tap on her key board with her slender fingers. On the table were books about mathematical theory and construction engineering that looked difficult to read. Each one of them were thick enough to be used as a murder weapon, like a wall that isolate herself from her neighbouring seat.

The books were in the way and made it hard to peek at her screen. Hiyuki also adjusted the brightness of the monitor down, and with the tiny font size she was using, Ao could only tell that the screen was covered in words.

But watching her from up close, she really is a mature beauty.

Overwhelmed by the aura Hiyuki's pale and translucent skin was emitting, and her ice cold eyes and straight back, Ao felt increasingly uncomfortable. At this moment…

I already went out of my way to come here, and have confirmed that Hyonomiya-san is Sameyoroi.

Ao gathered himself, and took out a light novel from his bag.

On the cover was a young man wielding a sword and a girl holding a girl. It was a fantasy battle novel that was all the rage recently. He didn't finish it earlier but just happen to have stuffed it into his bag.

Ao purposely dropped the book besides Hiyuki's feet.

"Ah, sorry."

Hiyuki who was staring at the monitor turned to look at Ao for the first time. Her long eyelashes dropped a little, she pushed her thin lips tightly together as she looked at Ao with a cold gaze.

Architecture
都市と環境

Uwah...

The moment their eyes met, Ao felt electricity running down his back. Hiyuki was so beautiful, graceful and cold, exactly like his classmates described. Ao was as nervous as a vassal kneeling before his queen and his entire body turned stiff. Extraordinary beauty could also be a weapon to subdue an opponent. Ao experienced this first hand as he looked at Hiyuki's face directly.

He thought Hiyuki would picked up the book and return it to him, but Hiyuki didn't look as if she planned to do that.

"Haha, I dropped my book."

Ao made an excuse and bent down. When he saw her white porcelain legs protruding from the edge of her skirt, his heart started to race and he averted his eyes in a panic.

After picking up the book, Ao realized that Hiyuki was still staring at him. Or rather, her cold eyes seemed to be saying that she didn't see Ao at all.

Ao still felt fearful after seeing her reaction, but…

"Ah, I am your classmate Ao Kazetani, Hyonomiya-san. Do you remember me?"

Mustering his courage, he asked softly:

Hiyuki’s expression didn’t change.

“… Emm.”

She answered with a tone as frosty as her expression.

That’s great, she knows that I am her classmate.

Ao relaxed.

“This book is the newest release of this series, it was published just recently and is really good, I really like this series now. Hyonomiya-san, do you read light novels?”

Ao showed Hiyuki the cover and tried to find a topic to chat with her.

From the manuscript Hiyuki submitted, this series was the type that suited Hiyuki. Also, this series set off a boom among the light novel readers, so the probability of a high schooler contestant reading this series was high.

Hiyuki’s lowered her eyes, and looked at the book in Ao’s hand in a mature and enchanting expression, but there wasn’t any light in her cold eyes.

“… No.”

She answered softly with a voice that almost freezed the air, then turned her face away.

The sound gave the feeling of a roller shutter shutting forcefully.

— It’s bothersome, please don’t talk to me.

Ao’s entire body froze solid as he took that was what Hiyuki meant.

Hiyuki gathered her notes and stationery into her bag, then left the computer lab while carrying the books in her arms as if she felt unhappy about Ao chatting her up, and wanted to go to a place where Ao wasn’t there.

Her lips which had a mole besides it remained tightly shut as Hiyuki gazed downwards, straighten her body with an icy expression, and left Ao’s side without a word. Ao felt a wenching pain in his chest and his face heating up because of the shame as he watched Hiyuki leave.

Uwah… How shameful.

“What is it Ao, why are you sighing?”

After he return home, Ao went to Sakutaro’s apartment and sulked on the floor. The book he read half way was just laid there and his face was sullen. Hence, Sakutaro called out to him.

It was rare to see Sakutaro working so hard. He spin his chair away from his desk surrounded by three computers, leaned forward and asked:

“Is it love-related troubles? If so, you can talk to your uncle about it.”

Sakutaro smiled widely.

Why did his classmate and Sakutaro think that Ao was in love? Speaking of which, even though it wasn’t trouble with love, it did involve a girl. Sakutaro had dated plenty of girls, and his description of the mindset of the girls making an appearance in his games were quite high in standard. Sakutaro himself said that real girls weren’t so easy to deal with though. However, since he could state it so readily, he must understand the mindset of girls in the real world well right?

And so, Ao tried asking quietly.

“... Let’s say if, if an aloof and beautiful girl who doesn’t talk to anyone in class…”

“Oh, nice, the silent and cool type?”

“I happen to find out about the other side of that girl, and in order to understand that side of her more, I tried talking to her about that topic. But she ignored me and started avoiding me, which means she didn’t want to discuss about that topic. Does she… find me annoying? That’s definitely it.”

When he said it out loud, he felt a stone drop in his stomach.

He didn’t think she would stand up and leave. Was listening to Ao such a bother? Ao thought that she would be more receptive if he use light

novels as a topic, and she might want to talk about writing novels herself.

“Was she troubled? Or was she afraid of you?”

Sakutaro showed an expression of ‘look at what you did, dummy’ and said.

“Afraid of me?”

“Because, that unexpected side of silent-chan wasn’t found out by anyone right? For her, it was something she wanted to hide.”

“Yes, so I annoyed her and made her mad when I mention that topic.”

“Yeah, there are such cases too. Someone who is always alone, is she strong or timid? No, even someone really strong have a cowardly side. This type of people are afraid of getting hurt by others. That’s why, when someone hint that: “I know everything” about the things they were hiding in their heart, they would be scared out of their wits.

Did Hiyuki leave because she was angry at Ao, or because she was afraid?

Sakutaro’s words struck Ao like lightning.

Back then, Hiyuki’s tightly closed lips, her queen-like expression… But what if things were like Sakutaro said, and that’s not how she really felt?

“Isn’t this common in games? Getting ahold of the weak point of the silent beauty, blackmailing them with it and taming them accordingly. For male orientated games, the setting of the male characters would be more crude. For female orientated games, they would be cool and handsome men. As for you, you don’t need to use intimidation. For boys with raging hormones like you, the girls will listen to you if you adopt a more forceful attitude.”

“If the one pressuring them were the handsome type they prefered, they will submit wholeheartedly, that’s what the girls want.” Sakutaro started talking about games with blackmailing themes, which made Ao’s face turn pale.

Blackmail! Did Hyonomiya-san think I was blackmailing her?

The next day, Ao waited uneasily in the classroom for Hyonomiya Hiyuki to show up. If Hiyuki thought that Ao was holding on to her weak point, and was afraid that Ao would make overboard demands, then he needed to resolve this misunderstanding and put her at ease.

Ao kept looking at Hiyuki’s seat, and his classmates whispered to each other:

“He’s in love.”

“He has fallen for her.”

Hiyuki should be writing in the computer lab this morning too. Ao really wanted to meet her there, but that would only make Hiyuki more afraid.

Ao was enduring it, and right before self study in the morning began, Hiyuki entered the classroom. She kept her eyes down, not looking at Ao at all.

What should I do? I have to try to talk to her. It would be weird if I suddenly say 'I won't tell anyone that Hyonomiya-san entered a light novel contest."

If he really said that, Hiyuki would probably turn pale from shock.

Ao kept following that icy face of hers and worry. At this moment, Hiyuki sneaked a peek at Ao's direction.

Ao and Hiyuki locked their eyes for an instant.

Ao opened his eyes in surprise, Hiyuki's shoulders shuddered a little and she showed a meek expression. She then reverted back to her frosty face, lowered her eyes and walked to her seat. With her back straight, she started taking textbooks out of her bag.

Just now… she seemed to be showing a scared look.

When he saw the 'Ice Maiden' looking fearfully, Ao's heart almost stopped. When it started beating again, it did so really intensely.

So she can show that kind of expression too.

To avoid spooking her, Ao peeked at her carefully, and saw Hiyuki holding her Kitefin Shark mechanical pencil with her head down.

What do I need to do to talk to her without alarming her...

As Ao was thinking about various things, the first period ended. The next lesson was computing. Ao followed his classmates and headed for the computer lab.

He thought Hiyuki would reach the computer lab first, but there was no signs of her and his other classmates got into their seats one by one.

Hyonomiya-san sat there yesterday, I sat besides her and showed her a light novel. I talked to her, and she stood up and left in the end.

As Ao thought about what happened yesterday with a bitter expression.

“Hmm? What is this!?”

A male student who sat at the computer where Hiyuki was seated yesterday yelled.

“There are still words on the screen, someone forgot to delete it? Stuff like ‘Bong– Bang!’, ‘It’s striped patterned~’, this is a light novel!”

“!”

Ao held his breath.

The manuscript written by Hiyuki on the school computer was still there? Did Hiyuki forget to delete it? The other classmates gathered to look at the screen.

“Wahh! ‘Fluffy’, ‘Sparkling—☆’, are you for real? ‘Master~ it’s striped patterned panties~’, how disgusting, all light novels are like this.”

“Light novels are books Otakus read, those with girls flashing their panties on the cover right? Reading such brainless things so happily, they must be idiots.”

“The person who keep giggling to themselves while writing this must be a moron, how disgusting.”

Not just the boys, even the girls were like this.

“Ew, how disgusting.”

“How crude—

Everyone looked at the screen together and was getting rowdy.

When he saw Hiyuki standing at the entrance with a pale face, Ao was shocked.

Hints of weakness surfaced on her cold eyes, just like what he saw by chance during class. Her thin lips that had a mole besides it also turned white, her slender fingers that were holding her textbooks to her chest were trembling slightly. When someone said:

“Disgusting—”, she slumped her shoulders with a fearful face—

When he saw that, Ao squeezed into the crowd and pulled the plug of the computer.

As the devious male students were shouting about ‘let’s find the culprit who wrote this’, the monitor blacked out.

“Wah, what are you doing!?”

Ao said with a refreshing smile while holding the end of the plug:

“Sorry, I am the one who wrote that.”

Hiyuki who was standing at the entrance with her shoulders withdrawn widened her eyes.

Ao said cheerfully before his dumbfounded classmates:

“Because light novels are the best! The most popular anime right now that has been confirmed to make it to the big screen, ‘The Mage of Time and Dragon’, was adapted from a light novel. Ono, didn’t you watch it last week and even cried?”

“Ah, yeah.”

Ao deflected the topic to a classmate who opened his eyes wide and lowered his head.

“Koken too, didn’t you say the ‘Fluffy high school battle chronicle’ I

lent you is super interesting, and you finished ten volumes in three days? Or you don’t want to borrow the sequels?”

“N-No, please lend the sequels to me.”

Ao smiled gently.

“No problem.”

He then clapped his hands together, and said with a slightly embarrassed expression:

“So, everyone please forget what you saw just now. I put in a lot of effort into it! Also, if you read on, you will find that it is really interesting.”

Hiyuki opened her eyes wide again, her lips with the charming mole besides it were open slightly because of surprise.

“Hmm, alright, show it to us next time.”

“Okay—— Ara, my masterpiece~ the data is all gone.”

Ao sighed exaggeratedly, and his classmates all laughed.

The atmosphere in the classroom soothed. After the teacher entered the room, everyone scattered and returned to their seats.

Hiyuki also sat down some distance away from Ao.

Her long eyelashes lowered as she made a cold expression, clicking the Kitefin Shark mechanical pencil in her hand.

“……”

It was noon when Hiyuki approached Ao.

Ao bought bread at the canteen, and in the corridor back to the classroom, Hiyuki appeared suddenly from the corner.

She probably heard that Ao went to buy bread, and waited here for him.

She stared at Ao who was holding pineapple bread, veggie salad, croquette and milk, she said softly:

“Why… did you claim to have written it?”

“Ehh, back then, I did so on reflex…”

Ao answered apologetically. Hiyuki slumped her shoulders a little and lowered her gaze.

“… You know… that I wrote it right?”

Ao hesitate for a moment.

“Yes.”

He answered.

Hiyuki pulled her shoulders back more.

“Why… do you know… that I am writing that?”

Ao started hesitating.

It was a secret that the high schooler Ao was working as a screener. And a screener telling a contestant that he had read her work was against the rules.

But Hiyuki took the initiative to find Ao, that meant she was very confused. Why did a classmate who didn’t cross path with her at all know her secret? Yesterday, he was talking as if he knew everything.

Ao felt that it was unfair to muddle the topic after making Hiyuki so troubled, so Ao said quietly:

“Because I read Hyonomiya-san’s manuscript.”

“Read my manuscript…?”

Hiyuki lifted her head, her face filled with confusion. Ao continued with a serious expression:

“Hyonomiya-san used the pen name Yoroisame and submitted the work ‘The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero,

demon king and the emperor of a harem paradise’ into the contest —— I saw this manuscript when I was working as a screener.”

Hiyuki turned expressionless, then her face suddenly reddened.

The ‘Ice Maiden’ whose eyes were glittering with cold light became like a cooked octopus. From her ears to her neck—— even the place around the mole by her lips were unbelievably red. Her slightly open lips trembled nonstop, and tears welled in her eyes.

Ao was shocked by her change. Hiyuki lowered her head forcefully.

“… You, got the wrong person…”

She was as quiet as the buzzing of a fly.

“Ah, Hyonomiya-san.”

Hiyuki moved amazingly fast and ran away from Ao with a swish.

Hiyuki only returned to the classroom when the fifth period was about to start. With an unnatural posture as she averted her face away from Ao, she walked to her seat and turned to the window as if she was avoiding Ao’s eyes.

She was always keeping her posture straight as she looked at the blackboard, but for the fifth and sixth period, Hiyuki shrinked her shoulders as she looked out the window.

As she did so, Hiyuki held the mechanical pencil with a large eyed

Kitefin Shark tightly.

The way Hiyuki was acting made Ao very anxious.

Is it better to not tell her that I read her work? She is not thinking that I am threatening her right?

Chapter 2: The Reason She Writes

After school was out, Hiyuki picked up her bag that had already been packed before the class was over, and rushed out of the classroom.

A classmate asked for light novel recommendations, and after Ao answered, he took his bag and left the classroom. He changed his shoes at the shoe rack and went to the parking lot to take his bike. When he was opening the lock, he felt someone staring at him.

He looked back, and didn’t see anyone.

Ao thought he was imagining things. He undid the lock and rolled the bicycle out. He felt a prickly sensation around his neck again.

Someone was watching him?

He turned again.

This time, he saw light brown hair around the corner of the building. The hair was brushed by the late spring wind, and seemed translucent under the glare of the sun.

“Hmm? Hyonomiya-san?”

Not expecting to be called, the white hand and slender shoulder

poking out from behind the building shuddered, then turned away in a hurry.

“Wait, Hyonomiya-san!”

Ao pushed his bicycle along and gave chase.

Hiyuki walked in front of Ao, her long brown hair swaying with each step she took, with her bag clutched tightly before her chest. She was walking at a very fast pace with her white slender legs.

Walking to her side, Ao saw that her lips with a mole besides it were tightly shut. Although her expression were cold, her eyes were red.

“Hyonomiya-san, I am sorry about what happened at noon.”

“……”

“I surprised you when I mentioned the manuscript submission, right?”

“……”

“I am really sorry, but, you probably won’t believe me even if I told you I am working as a screener, right?”

“……”

“I just happened to read your manuscript, Hyonomiya-san. Your manuscript just happened to be in the batch that was sent to me. I read through the personal particulars, and found your name and our school.”

“……”

Hiyuki’s thin lips remained tightly shut, her eyes downcast as she continued walking. They passed through the school gate and onto the pedestrian walkway, going past the bus stop. After turning into a side street, beautiful houses could be seen on either side of the road. Every household had a flourishing courtyard well taken care of, and the two continued on their way.

“I am not planning to tell anyone about Hyonomiya-san entering the Newcomer Contest at all, or thinking about blackmailing you.”

Ah, maybe I shouldn’t mention about blackmailing? Hyonomiya felt more guarded to Ao, which made him anxious. But Hiyuki who was walking silently all this time stopped all of a sudden.

The vines covering the wall besides her were blooming with small pink roses, and a large tree filled with white flowers was opposite to her.

Hiyuki bit her lips and lowered her head.
“……”

Her eyes turned redder, and she said with a voice so soft it seemed to

be vanishing:

“… Kazetani-kun… Have you, read my manuscript…?

“Ah, yes…”

“… All of it?”

“… Yes.”

“… Until the end?”

“… Yes.”

He read to the last line, going through it slowly and in detail, and filled in a comment sheet.

Hiyuki seemed to be mumbling shyly, lifting her head to look at Ao frantically after slooping her shoulders.

Hiyuki was taller than most girls, and Ao was slightly shorter than an average boy. The distance between their eyes were really close when he looked at Hiyuki who was about his height, which made him panic.

Hiyuki’s eyes were watery, but the mole besides her slightly open lips looked really sexy.

Uwah, my face is hot, is my face red now?

Hiyuki looked at the anxious Ao unconfidently and spoke hesitantly:

“W-What do you think about my work…?”

When Ao reached home, it was already evening.

“I’m home.”

When the residential zone was dyed red from the setting sun, Ao opened the door and announced. His younger brother and sister, twins who just entered primary school ran over noisily.

“You are back, Ao.”

“Ao, you are home.”

They were still young, so the twins were about the same size despite their gender. Their big eyes and thick lips looked alike.

As for personality, the brother was naughty while the sister was well behaved. Ao felt amazed that the difference between boys and girls showed even at such a tender age. Or maybe it just happened to be so for the twins in Ao’s family.

The twins got along well and was always played together. The mischievous brother liked baseball and soccer while the gentle sister liked drawing and playing house. They always squabbled over what games to play, and Ao would act as the referee in such cases.

“Ao, let’s continue the video game.”

“Ao, let’s draw.”

The two of them tugged Ao’s arm from each side.

“I will inspect your homework first, whoever finish first can come and play.”

“Yes! I will go do my homework!”

“Me too!”

The twins gave an innocent answer, Ao patted their head and said: “That’s great.”

At this moment, his mother poked her head out.

“Welcome back Ao, you are late today.”

“Yes, I went for some tea with my friend.”

Ao answered nonchalantly, then recalled his conversation with Hiyuki.

“W-What do you think about my work…?”

After Hiyuki asked with a hesitant expression, Ao couldn’t answer immediately.

“About that, eh…”

Hiyuki looked up at Ao with a very serious face, she seemed to be grabbing her bag harder as her fingers were trembling slightly. Ao felt pressurized by Hiyuki, and couldn’t answer casually.

“Let’s not stand here and talk, want to sit down somewhere?”

He made a suggestion.

“… There’s, a cafe nearby… In that alley, I think, people from school… probably don’t frequent there.”

She continued in a soft voice.

“Let’s go there then.”

The cafe suggested by Hiyuki was a plain shop that had a homey feel, with the first story being a residence remodelled into a shop front. There were coffee coloured wooden chairs inside, the type that would appear only in fairy tales, along with wooden tables that seemed quite aged. On the chairs were hand sewn pillows with striped patterns, and the wallpaper had a warm lozenge design.

A cup of tea or coffee was 450 yen, slightly more expensive than the

beverage sold at the convenience shops, but more economical than normal cafe.

During such time on weekdays, there were many empty seats. A woman about college age was reading inside and there were two elderly ladies conversing with elegant voices, making the shop feel serene and comfortable.

The shop lady smiled gently and let them choose any seat they liked. And so, Ao and Hiyuki chose a round table by the wall and sat opposite to each other.

Hiyuki kept glancing at Ao, anxiously seeking his opinion about her work. Ao ordered milk and Assam tea, Hiyuki asked for Chrysanthemum tea. Ao then said:

“Hyonomiya-san’s work is very interesting.”

Hiyuki’s expression brightened.

“Erm, well… Did I make it past the first round?”

“Ehh… I can’t divulge before the official announcement… But…”

Ao stammered, and Hiyuki’s face became disappointed as she looked down sadly.

“I didn’t, get selected… again.”

Ao didn’t know what to do as Hiyuki seemed really depressed.

He couldn’t tell her the results, but Hiyuki was right. Ao didn’t send Hiyuki’s work to the second round.

Instead of giving her hope and letting her find out herself, it would be better to let her know now, which would probably hurt less. But learning such regrettable news less than a month after her submission, Ao could only say that he was sorry.

The shopkeeper served the tea on a tray and poured out a cup. But Hiyuki didn’t reach out for it, and just spoke in a depressed voice with her eyes looking down.

“… I… already submitted five times… And failed every time. Is it because my work is very vulgar?”

“Hmm?”

“Because it is cheap and make others unpleasant?”

“Hmmm?”

“It is unconvincing, and presumptuous?”

“Wait, wait a minute, Hyonomiya-san.”

With negative terms being uttered one after another, Ao said in a panic:

“I don’t think that. It didn’t send it to the second round, but I feel that

Hyonomiya-san’s work is really interesting. I wrote that in my comment sheet too, it would take a while before it is posted, please read it then.”

“… Does my work really… have interesting parts?”

“Yes.”

Ao nodded with a smile. Hiyuki widened her eyes, lowered her gaze then fidgeted with the handle of the cup and said:

“… But, the other screeners found it boring… All the comment sheets I got said so. The story is messy, use cheap words, vulgar, hard to read, the main character feel unpleasant… The structure of the story is unconvincing at all, the content is presumptuous, not interesting at all. My overall score is always the lowest, getting C if there are three grades, E if there are five…”

Editors from any publisher would remind the screeners time and again that the contestants were light novel readers too, and to not write overly critical comments or condemn their work.

But there were still troublesome screeners who would write critique with an aloof attitude, thinking that the submitters should not be uncultured writers who didn’t even know the basics of writing. Ao heard Sakutaro mention this.

Such artistic creation based screeners had the opinion that changing the font size and using unnecessary punctuation marks were vulgar and cheap, and hated such a way of writing.

For example ellipsis should be two sets of three dots (……), if they see any manuscript that uses just three dots (…), they would judge that the author was lousy who didn’t even know the basics of writing, concluding that the work wasn’t good and didn’t have any reading value. Ao was surprised when he heard about such screeners.
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellipsis#In_Japanese>

It was true that ellipsis should be (……), but recently, for young authors who publish their work online, it was easier to read on the monitor if they used (…) instead, and they had gotten used to such a writing style. They shouldn’t use this point to judge an author.

The editors would teach them about it after their work was selected, so it shouldn’t affect the whole body of work. Ao saw many interesting and wonderful manuscripts that didn’t use ellipsis correctly. On the other hand, there were many works with flawless wording, but was lacking in charm.

Ao once read an entry that didn’t leave any indentation for paragraphs, lumping all the words together. He didn’t know how to read on in the beginning, but on closer inspection, he found the writing to be vivid and lively, the story was full of personality, breaking the standard mold. To write such a work despite not knowing the basics of writing format, this author had tremendous potential! Ao sent the work to the second stage with a heart full of anticipation. It didn’t win the grand prize due to a clash of opinions, but it still received a special prize, and became a top seller of that serialization.

As such a thing happened before, Ao said with a face of surprise:

“It would be impossible to overturn the situation if you run into someone who thinks his own standard is the only correct one. I can only give my condolences if anyone get such a screener.”

But of course, professional screeners won’t let a work with the potential of success fall through the crack. However, some screeners made unnecessary and nasty comment to unsuccessful contestants. The contestants become infuriated after receiving the results and post the content onto the internet, making huge waves. Something like that has happened before.

Hyonomiya definitely encountered such a screener.

He couldn’t just give his condolences

With her shoulders slump, eyes downcast and biting her lips, the depressed Hiyuki didn’t look like the solitary beauty known as the ‘Ice Maiden’, and looked so pitiful.

“I think Hyonomiya-san is just unlucky. Your work isn’t perfect, the font size changes and punctuation is a little excessive, which might leave a bad impression, but there are good points too. If you can bring them out, you can definitely pass the first round of selection.”

Ao said passionately and Hiyuki lifted her head and looked at him. Ao then said:

“The tea here is nice.”

He said with a smile after pouring milk into the Assam tea and taking a sip. Hiyuki also lowered her gaze frantically, and brought her golden chrysanthemum tea to her mouth.

“... It taste, really good.”

She mumbled.

“... I pass by this cafe often... I always wanted to come in and take a look, but didn’t dare to do that alone...”

“Me too, it’s hard for a guy to enter such a cute shop, I’m glad to have come together with Hyonomiya-san.”

Hiyuki’s cheeks turned red. She kept her gaze low, and spoke softly:

“E-Erm... ‘The lost heavenly ball’ series... I am reading it too...”

That was the light novel Ao intentionally dropped onto the floor in order to strike a conversation with Hiyuki. Ao felt his heart opening up.

“I was right! I thought that Hyonomiya-san probably read this series.”

“I am a super fan...”

“Yes, the twist and development for each book really excites me! Have you read the latest volume?”

“Yes, when Takato... helped Falumia... I was deeply moved.”

“Yes, that part is really hot blooded! And that time when the lone wolf Jacille actually uttered the taboo chant for his comrade.”

“… I cried when I saw that part.”

“Me too.”

Before they knew it, the two of them were talking passionately about light novels. ‘The lost Heavenly Ball’ was an entry Ao selected for the second round. He thought that work was very interesting, and wanted the wide audience to experience it for themselves too. That’s why Ao was really happy and excited when Hiyuki timidly express her thoughts about it.

“… Kazetani-kun, how did you start working as a screener…?”

Hiyuki was still bothered by this matter, and asked cautiously.

“Ehh, I actually can’t say that I am a screener. Can you keep this a secret for me?”

Hiyuki nodded gently.

“… Yes, I don’t have anyone to speak to anyways.”

Ao felt that the way she put it sounded very lonely. But Hiyuki didn’t sound like she needed sympathy and was just stating a fact, so Ao just pretended he never heard that.

“My uncle works in the video game industry, in the beginning, I was

taking on the job my uncle took…”

Ao started explaining how he took on the job of screener. Hiyuki opened her eyes wide and listened with bated breath. Finally—

“Such a thing… actually happened.”

She muttered sentimentally.

“Yes, it’s like a development in a light novel. But I heard some of the screeners could be a housewife or vegetable shopkeeper who the screener knew. Also, some of the screeners for female oriented novels might be the illustrationist for H games or middle aged man in their forties.”

“H games…?”

Hiyuki tilted his head slightly.

“Ah, that… is R18 games. My uncle produces such games. It will be adapted into an all age version sometimes, but that’s how it is. Ahh, it might be H games, but it has interesting and moving contents too! Oh right, the ones I play are the all age versions!”

“Yes… Yes.”

When she found out H games were erotic games, her face turned bright red. Her skin was very white to begin with, so it was obvious when she blushed.

Ao originally thought that she would know a little about H games even if she didn’t play, since she wrote things like ‘It’s striped panties☆’. Turned out he was wrong.

Discussing such lewd stuff with such a serious girl, isn’t that sexual harassment…? Ao’s face started to heat up.

Hyonomiya-san the person is so different from her work. Unlike our classmates’ impression of her, she might seem cold, but chat readily with me. She blushes easily and is careful with her words… How deep and hard to understand.

When the conversation stopped and both of them felt awkward, Hiyuki spoke first:

“I have… a curfew in my place, I have to go now.”

Ao heard that Hiyuki walked to school from an old Japanese style mansion. If she could walk home from this place, then her curfew was too early. Ao heard she was living with her strict grandmother, that’s why it was like this.

“It’s about time I go home too.”

Ao stood up as well.

Because the two of them were too engrossed in their conversation, Ao barely made it back home before dinner on his bicycle.

“Although I am working as a screener, Hyonomiya-san is the first light novel author I met. I am glad I could chat with you today.”

“M-Me too…”

“Well then, let’s talk about light novel again if we have time. Ah, if you don’t want to talk to me in school, just ignore me. I will tell you my phone number and email, just contact me when you want to.”
<TL: In Japan, text messaging is mostly done through email. https://www.rentafonejapan.com/Email-Texting.html >

Ao spoke casually as he normally did when exchanging contact details with other classmates. Hiyuki turn fidgety, and seemed to be contemplating something.

“Kazetani… I have a favour to ask.”

“Hmm, what is it?”

Ao who was holding his cell phone stood stiff for a moment. Hiyuki’s face, including the region around her mole became flushed, as she said with without reservation:

“Please teach me how to write light novels.”

Hyonomiya was too serious, so I told her ‘I will teach you everything I know’ without thinking’. Will it actually work, I didn’t research the way to write light novel before.

After having dinner, Ao sat before the desk in his room, staring at the point card given by the cafe. If he accumulates ten points, he could exchange it for a handmade desert. There was a stamp of a teacup on the digit ‘1’ of the card.

He also received a 50 yen voucher.

Under those circumstances, he arranged with Hiyuki to meet at the same cafe after school tomorrow, and he would advise Hiyuki on how to write her light novel.

I might be a screener, but I have never written a novel, and don’t know how to write a good light novel, I wonder if I will be of help. I told her that I would only be providing my personal opinions, and Hyonomiya-san said that is fine too.

— Just once is fine, I want to pass the first round of selection.

Hiyuki looked at Ao with serious eyes.

Just for one project, she hope Ao could help her.

“Yes, let’s give it a try, this seem fun.”

Ao smile and muttered.

They arranged to head for the cafe separately via email. After school was out, Hiyuki left the classroom while Ao mulled time by chatting with his classmates a little. After turning down their invitation to idle at a fast food restaurant, he left the classroom.

He rode his bicycle and headed for the cafe he visited yesterday.

When he opened the door, he found Hiyuki sitting at the same round table they occupied yesterday.

“Sorry, did you wait long?”

“No… I just got here too.”

Hiyuki opened her lips that had a charming mole. It was still cold, but her expression was much gentler.

When Hiyuki was in school, her eyes never met Ao. Her back was always straight, and she gave off an icy atmosphere. Ao’s classmates said: “The Ice Maiden today is also an iron wall.” “No, it should be an ice wall.”

“Ao, are you really planning to woo Hyonomiya? I advise you not to, your chest would be pierced by icicles and you will never recover.”

“A normal highschool boy being favoured by a beautiful model student can only happen in the world of light novels.”

His classmates advised him.

Ao answered that he unintentionally glanced Hyonomiya's way a few times because she was really pretty. But he was actually thinking:

Nobody knows, but Hyonomiya-san is someone who will restrain herself and speak in a soft voice with watery eyes. She writes stories and enter them into context, didn't know about H-games but will write scenes about skirts flipping up and exposing striped panties.

When he thought about that, he could feel a sense of superiority in his heart.

After school was out, in the cafe that other students doesn't frequent. The moment he met with Hiyuki alone, the sense of superiority made Ao very excited and put a spring in his steps.

Ao sat opposite Hiyuki and ordered Darjeeling tea today.

"Since you have a curfew, let's get started."

Ao spoke brightly while Hiyuki frowned her face a little from nervousness. She seemed to have reverted to her usual icy expression.

"Hyonomiya-san, which contest would you like to enter next?"

"... I want to enter the Eidansha's Star Literature prize."

"That is the first serialization I screened."

“I-Is that so?”

The outline of Hiyuki’s face soften.

“The entry deadline is 15th July.”

“… Yes.”

“It’s mid may now, there is still about two months left. Hyonomiya-san, how long would it take you to write a manuscript?”

“Storyboarding… Will take about a week, and in terms of manuscript paper, I can write ten to fifteen pages a day… I can’t write during on non school days… So, about a month? Next would be checks and editing… I think… All of this will take a month and a half.”

“Why can’t you write on non school days?”

Ao asked and Hiyuki looked down, finding it hard to speak.

“I don’t… have a computer at home. And my grandmother… hates anime and games, so she banned me… from them. So I can’t read light novels at home…”

It was rare to see parents restricting their child from anime or games, and on top of that, it was a grandparent doing it to a grandchild in high school. Someone of her grandmother’s generation probably still thought that something like an anime negatively impacted the child’s education. That early curfew also showed that her grandmother was

as strict as the rumours said.

What about Hyonomiya's parents? They are not living together?

Ao was bothered by this, but he couldn't ask as Hiyuki seemed troubled by this.

It appeared that this was the reason why Hiyuki spent all day in the computer lab at school. It was hard to imagine that she could only write in school. Ao thought that she was impressive to work relentlessly every day and finish the manuscript in a month.

Ao praised Hiyuki with a hearty voice, but she slumped her shoulders and said:

"Because… I don't have anything else to do."

She seemed to be embarrassed about her answer.

"How do you print it out? Not all publishers accept electronic submission right?"

"… It would be too conspicuous to mass print in school, so I do it at a web cafe."

"I see, you use a web cafe for electronic submission too?"

"Yes."

She nodded.

Despite her mature appearance in school, Ao couldn’t help but smile at her childish demeanour.

“Alright, let’s enter the Eidansha’s Star Literature prize with the closing date on July 15th . There are two months, more than enough time with Hyonomiya’s pace, so take it easy.”

“… Yes.”

Colour returned to Hiyuki’s cheek, and she seemed happy.

“For the next two months… I will be troubling you.”

Smooth silky brown hair fell from her shoulders as Hiyuki gave a formal bow to Ao, which made him a little embarrassed.

“Me too, please take care of me for the next couple of months. Also, I said yesterday that I can only give my personal opinion, if Hyonomiya-san think it is wrong, don’t force yourself to accept it and do say it out! Ah, I want to hear your comments too!”

“… I-I will try my best.”

Hiyuki answered worryingly, unsure if she could do it.

Ao was nervous too, wondering if he could give advice on how to write a novel. He felt uneasy, but since he was asked, he had to carry on.

Cheering for himself in his heart, Ao looked at Hiyuki and asked

cheerfully:

“First, what kind of story does Hyonomiya want to write about the most?”

Hiyuki looked troubled.

“Write about the most…?”

“That’s right, the most. A lot of people would take into account the features of the serialization, consider the preference of the readers and so on before deciding on the topic. This is a strategy, but thinking about it from the basics is great too.”

After reading Hiyuki’s submission, he felt a lot of places were stiff because she tried to stuff too many things into her story in the hope to attract more readers.

That’s why Ao hoped Hiyuki could write about a topic she liked.

“If an author writes something with the feeling ‘I must write about this’, the reader can feel it when they read it, and others will want to support the author. That’s why we should use ‘the things I want to write about’ as the core and decide on the setting of the characters and story, with the goal of passing the first round of selection. I think this is an effective way of doing it.”

“Ah… Yes.”

Hiyuki nodded.

“Well then, I will ask again. Hyonomiya-san, what are the things you want to write about, no matter what?”

“Eh, Ehhh…”

Since she was thinking about it seriously, it meant there was something she wanted to write about, and a lot of them too. Even though she was unable to write at home, she still kept writing despite her constrained environment. Hiyuki could produce a work every two months, so there were definitely things she wanted to write about.

But she couldn’t judge what she wanted to write about the most.

If she could only write one work in her entire life, what would she want to write about? It was impossible to answer that immediately.

Hiyuki furrowed her brows and shut her lips with a mole besides it tightly as she pondered seriously. Her narrow brows drooped gradually, and Ao decided to help her along when he saw that.

“It’s hard to answer, isn’t it? Then write it down.”

“Hmm?”

“Take out your pen and notebook, I will then count to fifty. Hyonomiya-san, please list the things you want to write about during this time. Anything will do, please jot down as much as possible.”

“F-Fifty!?”

The time given was probably too short and made her anxious. Hiyuki took out her pencil case and notebook in a panic. She clicked her Kitefin Shark mechanical pencil and opened the notebook.

“Starting now, one, two… three…”

Without waiting for Hiyuki to calm down, he started counting. This was a method Sakutaro often use when he had writer’s block.

— Ah, I can’t think of anything~ No ideas at all. Ao~ count to fifty~

Sakutaro told Ao as he grabbed his long messy hair.

As Ao counted, Sakutaro’s finger flew all over the keyboard, typing down single words or scenes.

According to Sakutaro, thinking disorderly will dull one’s mind. So it will be better to write down everything that came to mind in a short period of time instead of thinking.

The correct answer was hidden among these words.

“Forty one, forty two…”

As if she was being pursued by Ao’s counting, Hiyuki moved the Kitefin Shark mechanical pencil in her hand swiftly. She didn’t have time to think, so she could only write down the terms that came to her mind one after another. Her pale face was flushed.

“Forty eight, forty nine… Fifty.”

After Ao finished, Hiyuki slumped her shoulders and sighed in relief, her cheeks bright red.

“Let me take a look.”

Ao leaned forth and Hiyuki offered her notebook timidly and she looked at the words as if she wanted to confirm them herself.

The two of them read the nicely written characters on the notebook.

“Alternate world, transported, reincarnation, Kitefin shark, sea, lonely, making friends, good friends, warm, gentle, daily life, love.”

As Hiyuki looked at these words, her earloops to the mole near her mouth redden.

“T-That… I just wrote… what came across my mind.”

She was probably feeling embarrassed as she was showing her inner desire to others.

Ao looked at Hiyuki’s eyes and spoke cheerfully with confidence:

“This is the story Hyonomiya-san wants to write the most right now!”

Hiyuki held her breath.

Ao continued in a casual tone:

“Let’s make the setting of your new work this way. The lonely main character suddenly arrives in an alternate world, an underwater country with Kitefin Sharks, make new friends, fall in love, befriend everyone, a warm and gentle slice of life story. Is that alright, Hyonomiya-san?”

“I-Is that story… alright?”

Hiyuki asked uneasily.

“The readers will be bored if it is just a slice of life story, erm… how about writing fight scenes and dungeon adventures to create climax? That’s what the comment sheet said…”

“Hyonomiya-san, do you like writing about fight scenes?

“No… I don’t like it.”

There were scenes with fights and superpower battles in ‘The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero, demon king and the emperor of a harem paradise’; but the description was mostly done through sound effects and lacked any tension, so it didn’t fit in at all. Ao felt this was the part she tried too hard to shoehorn in.

“Then, let’s not write about fight scenes this time. The central theme of this submission is ‘the story you want to write about the most’, so don’t force yourself to write about something you are not interested in. It is true that putting in adequate battles could cumulate in a climax, but it is also possible to create this effect even if you write

about everyday life.”

“… How do I do that?”

“Let’s think about it next time. We will decide the main structure of the story for now. Personally, I think the main character reincarnating into a Kitefin shark is interesting, I want to read about that. Falling in love with a female shark, with his crab and anemone friends cheering him on, something like that.”

Hiyuki laughed.

Ah, she laughed...

Hiyuki’s tense expression relaxed, and smiled in a way only girls does, which made Ao’s heart race. Hiyuki used a serious voice and told Ao:

“That sounds interesting… However, I think the story Kazetani described earlier is closer to a light novel story. I want to write that, I want to write that very much.”

Hiyuki who wasn’t nervous anymore felt warm and looked really cute, which tugged even harder at Ao’s heart strings. He answered:

“Yes, that’s great.”

He nodded.

“The important thing is the novel Hyonomiya wants to write the most. I did say that it would be fine if the submission differed from the

serialization, but it would be hard for an entry to a Newcomer contest to pass through the first selection if the genre differs too much. Even if it makes it into the second round, it would most likely be filtered out. If the writing is great and the story structure is sound, that would be a pity. Why would someone submit period novels or hard science fiction into a light novel contest? I really want to send them to the second round because of how complete the work was, but if I do that, the author will enter the contest in the future right? If that is so, it would be better to screen it out in the first round, that would be better for the author right? I run into such trouble sometimes."

"Are there a lot of works… that doesn't match the genre?"

"The contest details are usually published in popular magazines, so a wide range of readers would read it. Most of the manuscripts from such magazines and new serializations would be messy. There would be fairy tales written completely in katakana for children, old men detailing their war experience, the thoughts on running a company written by some ceo, a love story between a forty plus woman and a twenty plus man. Ahh, also a manuscript full of photos that chronicles someone's trip across india. Showing a Victory hand gesture in Angkor Wat, he looked really happy. After reading it, I have a deep understanding of India. There's some who included a CD recording of a song written and sang by them with the manuscript."

"It's really… chaotic."

Hiyuki muttered with her eyes open, and Ao laughed.

"Yes, I had fun reading it!"

Seeing the face of the author and the myriads of submission works made Ao really excited. He felt happy turning every page.

Hiyuki stared straight at Ao.

She looked surprised.

“Eh, although the work isn’t suitable, I still feel happy and lucky to read so many stories. But I still hope the stories would be sent to the appropriate publishers . Sometimes, the publishers would express in the memo that we should ‘select more fantasy works if possible’, or ‘prioritize easy to read school life stories’, something like that.”

“Is that… so?”

Hiyuki gulped.

So the essential criteria for passing the first round had been predetermined before the selection, that too was shocking.

I slipped my tongue. I shouldn’t have mentioned that. Ao reflected and continued:

“From what I know, there are only two serializations that does this. Most serializations won’t be that specific for the first round of selection. There was also one time when the publisher told us to ‘give priority for school life stories’. But a submission that was centered around battles was interesting and made it to the second round of selection and won a prize, becoming a trending work. In the next contest, the point of emphasis became ‘give priority to battle theme

stories’. Such things happens, so don’t be too bothered.”

“Yes… okay.”

This time, Hiyuki breathed out in relief.

“Furthermore, if you focus too much on the demand of the publisher, you won’t be able to write about things you really want to, which is the problem. Matching the genre is important, but you don’t need to shoehorn things in. If everyone write the same stories, it would be boring.”

“So, balance is important… right?”

“That’s right, Hyonomiya-san, as expected of a model student.”

“Not at all…”

Hiyuki became fidgety.

They ended the session for the day at this juncture.

“I will work hard and write a story about being transported to a kingdom of Kitefin sharks, and the everyday life of the main character.”

Her lips with a charming mole turned up in a smile, Hiyuki said with a firm expression that made Ao’s pulse accelerate. At the entrance of the cafe, she nodded politely then went in the opposite direction Ao was going in a hurry, rushing home before her curfew.

The next day, they met up at the same cafe and sat opposite each other at the round table. The two of them ordered straight away, Hiyuki picking Chrysanthemum and Ao selecting Earl Grey tea.

Their conversation became smoother on their third meeting.

“… The people of this kingdom get along well with Kitefin sharks, and would wear something like oxygen tanks and dive into the sea, commuting in the sea by riding the sharks… The main character isn’t good with riding them, and is afraid that he will be eaten… In the alternate world, he meets a kind girl and eventually get close to her. She teach him how to ride sharks, and the main character got really good at it… The Kitefin shark is cold to him at first… But would let the main character ride it willingly after some time.”

“That’s good, how about setting each island as a country? Or each island being an independent city or something.”

“Yes, that sounds great.”

The two of them brainstormed ideas as they decided on the settings, chatting about idle things in between.

“Hyonomiya-san, why did you start writing light novels?”

“During autumn in my third year of middle school… a girl in the class

was saying: ‘how interesting and touching’ as she chatted about light novels. The other girls said: ‘I cried after reading it.’ ‘I want to know what happens next, so I kept reading, I like it a lot.’… I was curious… So I took note of the cover art and book title.”

Hiyuki then search for the book in a book shop, but gave up after failing to find it. She looked for it every time she visited a book shop, but she couldn’t find it.

Hiyuki’s phone only had call and email function. Her grandmother education policy dictated that the other functions were unnecessary. There wasn’t any computers in their home, and Hiyuki didn’t even know about web cafe back then.

She didn’t have any close friends, so she didn’t know who to ask ‘where can I buy that book’, and she was too shy to ask the shopkeeper directly.

“… I am gloomy and scary, so everyone avoided me.”

Nobody was avoiding her, Hiyuki was just too beautiful and looked like an elegant and refined lady from a different world from others, so the others were hesitant on approaching her. And Hiyuki seemed to think she was a hated person.

Her thoughts made Ao uncomfortable and anxious, but he kept his mouth shut and listened to her. At this moment, Hiyuki’s expression turned gentle.

“But, when I glanced at the calendar in the book shop in December, I

saw that book.”

It wasn’t in the normal literature section, but in the comic section.

Hiyuki was filled with emotions as she picked up that book, as if she had just seen a mystical flower, and engrossed herself in it after returning home.

“I… only read novels recommended in textbooks in the past… So when I see the illustrations, changing font size, multiple punctuation marks and entire blank pages when I opened the book, I was very surprised… To think such a novel exist, and there is such a way to write books.”

Hiyuki squinted her eyes in mesmeration, smiling as her cheeks turn red. From her passionate tone, it was clear how new, surprising and touching she felt after reading it.

Ao also remembered his excitement when he first read a light novel in Sakutaro’s place.

Completely overturning his concept of novels, the worlds crafted boldly and freely were so bright, so inspiring. The characters in the story seemed to be talking to him face to face.

Hiyuki’s gentle smile and sparkling eyes overlapped with the emotions he felt then, and Ao could feel his chest thump.

“… The books I had to read in order to write book reports always narrated sorrowful tales. When the characters suffer, I felt terrible

too… So I didn’t really like to read… But when I read that book, it was filled with wonderful things, beautiful things, happy scenes, joyous moments. Even when something sad happens, they will become happy in no time. The way the characters talk is just like everyone in class speaks… And I seemed to be talking along too… I felt really happy… I finished in no time… Then I held that book tightly… engrossed in it…”

“May I know the book title?”

“Chronicle of the Brave.”

“I see.”

Ao nodded.

A story of a High school boy summoned to an alternate world goes on a series of adventure, a popular work written in the free style and structure of a light novel. It was even adapted into an anime. In terms of character settings, be it the main protagonist or a side character, all of them had a vivid feel and charm. The skilled use of varying font size was at an expert level. Some said that the trend of using of varying font size in light novels increased after ‘BraveChro’ was published.

It was a work with both fame and disrepute, but Ao understood why Hiyuki became engrossed with light novels after reading ‘BraveChro’.

He also learned why Hiyuki’s writing was full of varying font size.

“I want to write a story that brings so much joy and excitement too… I

started writing light novels after my exams were over… I did so manually back then… But it was fun… It feels like I am just like the main character, and is journeying in the world of the light novels… In the story, I can talk to everyone too… Gathering everyone’s help to go adventuring together… it is really fun.”

Hiyuki’s expression turned a little gloomy.

Her brows drooped, her smiling lips became lifeless and the mole besides it seemed so lonely.

“But the stories I submitted… never made it through the first round… the comment sheets said: ‘Main characters that are too negative feels unpleasant, and is hard for readers to relate to. Writing is crude and immature, giving a presumptuous impression as a whole.’ After reading these comments, I realized that I am the only one who was happy about working on this project. People who read my work felt that the main character wass unpleasant and that I am presumptuous… makes me sad…”

Hiyuki’s voice became softer and softer.

Ao felt his chest hurting too.

They shouldn't write it that way. Unpleasant or not is a personal opinion, how could they critique this point?

Since the experts said so, it must be true. Submitters like Hiyuki who had low self esteem believed this.

Hiyuki looked down and said:

“So… If I can write a story that makes it through the first round, I won’t be an unpleasant and presumptuous person…”

That’s why she asked me for help so seriously and want to pass the first round of selection so badly?

When he thought about the mentality Hiyuki had, Ao’s chest ache even more.

When she failed to make the cut, that definitely reminded her about the accusation of being presumptuous. If the comments she received after that is also dismissive, she would feel terrible.

Not just the story, Hiyuki would feel that she herself was being rejected.

In order to encourage the depressed Hiyuki, Ao said:

“Alright, we will break through the first round with this work.”

Hiyuki’s eyes brightened as she lift her head to look at Ao, although there were still lingering unease in her gaze.

“… Can, can I really do it?”

“Well, let’s give it a shot.”

Ao smiled. Hiyuki stared at Ao, then answered stiffly:

“Yes.”

She nodded and lowered her gaze again.

If Hyonomiya-san makes it through the first round and gain some confidence, it would be great.

After returning home, Ao brought cabbage roll and carrot salad cooked by his mom to Sakutaro.

“Uncle Saku, did you ever fall into depression after the games you put in so much effort to make receive harsh criticism? In such cases, what can others say to revitalize you again?”

“I will usually curse at the monitor: Die idiot! Bastard! Then forget all about it. Just because the main heroine did something the player don’t agree with, and they all critique that she was acting out of character and displeased them. It can’t be helped that she is a slutty bitch, if I take their threats of boycott seriously and bottle it up in my heart, I will definitely kill myself. So I have to scold them back: You bastards are not popular with girls in the real world at all! Idiots! That would be enough. Get into a shouting match with them? Ain’t nobody got time for that!”

Maybe he shouldn’t have asked Sakutaro, Ao felt deflated.

If Hiyuki was as thick skinned as Sakutaro, with her beauty, she could lead a group of underlings and rule the campus as the queen of the school.

He imagined such a Hiyuki.

No, It is better for Hyonomiya-san to restrain herself and work hard.

Ao imagined Hiyuki smiling with her cute mole and reorganized his thoughts.

“What is it Ao? Some girl you want to woo?”

“Why did you bring this up again!? I didn’t even say anything related to that!”

“You want the trick to cheer up a depressed girl right?”

“Like I said, no!”

“The trick is to be a person who understands her. Like saying ‘I will always be by your side, and accompany you’, it’s cliche, but it works. She will completely lose the will to resist you. In less than three meetings, you can make her say ‘Let me be your woman’, then hug you tight.”

“That’s totally wrong!”

After leaving the food his mother tasked him to deliver, Ao ran away from Sakutaro’s place hurriedly.

The next day, after school was out.

“We decided the word setting and story structure, let’s think about the

main character today.”

“Yes…”

Before Ao was a cup of Jasmine tea, while Hiyuki had Chrysanthemum. When she heard what Ao said, Hiyuki’s shoulders slumped unconfidently.

“The basic premise is the lonely main character who arrives in an alternate world.”

“… Yes.”

“The main character is a lonely person in his original world, right?”

“… Yes.”

“Why?”

Hiyuki slumped her shoulders further.

“Be… Because he is moody… doesn’t chat with others… and look different from others too… Just the sight of him made others feel unpleasant…”

Hiyuki held her Kitefin shark mechanical pencil tightly.

“S-Such a main character isn’t good after all… Such a charmless main character… is impossible for the readers to relate to, that’s what the comments said…”

“That’s right.”

Hiyuki’s body shook when she heard Ao said that. Her brows drooped down and her head lowered too.

“If it is up to me, I will add the following: ‘So, try to bring out the charm of the main character in your writing.’”

“Charm…? My main character has charms?”

Hiyuki asked frantically.

“Yes the main character of ‘The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero, demon king and the emperor of a harem paradise’ is very charming.”

Hiyuki’s cheeks turned red.

“Y-You jest.”

“I’m not lying. In the beginning scene after the traffic accident, didn’t the main character apologized to the CEO who knocked him down in his heart: ‘Sorry for colliding with you, old man’? To think that way about the person who knocked him down, the main character is really a good guy. That’s what I feel.”

“……”

Hiyuki’s clear eyes were filled with a strong sense of doubt. She

probably thought the main character she wrote didn’t have any charm, so she couldn’t believe what Ao was saying.

However, it wasn’t a lie, Ao was serious.

“It would be a pity if the reader can’t understand his charm. It would be better to describe it in a way the readers can understand.”

“W-What should I do?”

“What does the main character think about his lonely circumstances?”

“H-He feels that if he can speak casually with everyone… That will be great… But he couldn’t interrupt a group that is chatting happily… he fears that everyone will be annoyed if he speaks up…”

“Then write down in detail the main character's thoughts. Instead of writing ‘I am a lonely and unnecessary person’, it would be better to describe how lonely he is, how he think about his situation, and what are his views. This way, the reader will know that the main character is someone who is troubled by this. It is impossible for anyone in this world to not feel lonely in their life, so the reader can definitely relate to this.”

“……”

“If such a main character works hard in expanding his world, making friends, falling in love, it will bring out his charm and give people to urge to cheer him on, right?”

Ao smiled gently. Hiyuki stared at him in silence, then gripped the Kitefin shark mechanical pencil in her hand again.

“I-I will try.”

She started making notes with a serious expression.

Will that advice do? Will it help Hiyuki? Will she accept it forcefully, despite having other opinions? Ao felt uneasy and continued.

“Since the main character is decided, next would be the heroine.”

“Should we… set five or so heroines? If there are more girls… It would be more elegant and lively.”

“Is that written on the comment sheet too?”

Hiyuki nodded.

“Just one girl is too monotonous, how about inserting rivaling female characters, and make the story more lively… That’s what it says.”

“Hmm, this is effective sometimes, but in this story, just setting one main heroine would be nice too. Hyonomiya-san, what do you think?”

“I prefer just one female character…”

“Then just set one heroine. What kind of personality would you like for her to have?”

“G-Gentle… Cheerful, kind… I-Is it okay if I make her more glamorous?”

“Eh, w-well…”

Ao was a bit troubled and sounded hesitant. Hiyuki turned red and lowered her face.

“The heroine is too well behaved, I would suggest having some scenes with eye candies to leave an impression for the readers. That’s what the comment sheet says.”

“Ehh, that depends on the story, so don’t squeeze scenes with striped panties in forcefully.”

“… Yes.”

And so, they completed the setting for the protagonist and the heroine. They then decided the personality of the people around the main character and the Kitefin sharks.

And so, after one week, when they have collected five coffee stamps—

“Well, we are done with the character and story setting.”

“Yes, the setting and scenes in the story came out one after another just by conversing with Kazetani-kun.”

The lips with a mole besides it turned up in a smile.

The story was about a lonely main character who came to an alternate world. In this world, Kitefin sharks were helpful companions to people, and enjoyed a close relationship with them. Here, he would meet a gentle heroine and a cold Kitefin shark. Their relationships would build and get better over time to make a warm slice of life story. The main character would be troubled by the gap between this world and his own; he would practice under the tutelage of the heroine in order to learn to ride a kitefin shark. They would visit a festival together, watch a Kitefin shark race which would heighten the atmosphere and the mood at the beach during the night would be great as well. The story would be written with these frames in mind.

“You just need to write the story out for now. Do you want to finish the entire thing before letting me read it? Or let me read whichever chapter you finish?”

“… One chapter at a time… Is it okay with you? If Kazetani-kun is busy… It’s fine to read it at the end.”

Hiyuki said worriedly.

Compared to the beginning, Hiyuki was more willing to speak her mind, and smiled more. However, she would show an unconfident expression from time to time.

Ao replied cheerfully:

“Alright, even if you didn’t finish an entire chapter and is stuck halfway, do let me read it and we can discuss together.”

“Yes… Yes.”

Hiyuki’s eyes had a tint of red. She lowered her gaze and the area around her endearing mole reddened.

Whenever Ao saw this expression, he would feel his heart stir. To hide this feeling, he spoke in the tone of a teacher. But he wasn’t that great in reality.

“Another thing, do you want to use the same writing style?”

Hiyuki’s expression turned stiff from unease again.

She looked at Ao.

“It’s… childish right?”

Her usage of varying font sizes, excessive punctuation marks and onomatopoeia was always harshly critiqued, and Hiyuki was very concerned about this. Even so, she still wanted to write in such a way, it was something she insisted on doing.

“Not at all.”

Ao answered confidently with a smile.

“The ones who criticize the usage of varying font size writing as childish is the real childish one with shallow thinking. Weren’t you moved after reading ‘BraveChro’, Hyonomiya-san?”

Hiyuki looked straight at Ao and nodded.

“… Yes.”

“BraveChro uses a lot of different font size, excessive punctuation marks and onomatopoeia for effect.”

“… Yes.”

“Other then Hyonomiya-san, a lot of readers also get a thrill and emotional upheaval when they read BraveChro, it even got an anime and was all the rage for a time.”

“… Yes.”

“Do you think the font size changes and multiple punctuation marks of BraveChro is unnecessary?”

Hyosetusu shook her head. Her soft brown hair swayed along with her.

“No.”

“Then Hyonomiya-san don’t need to give up on varying the font size. If you want to write in such a way.”

Hiyuki asked franctically:

“Can I… use varying font size?”

“Yes! I saw a work that skillfully use the font size changes to leave a deep impression, it would be great if you can surprise the reader that way.”

“Can I use multiple punctuations?”

“Yes! In the third volume of ‘The lost Heavenly Ball’, the multiple punctuations pushed the battle scene to its climax! That usage is definitely an art!”

“Can I use onomatopoeia?”

“Yes! If you use ‘pah’ at the right moment, the onomatopoeia that is used correctly will have great impact. ‘The best onomatopoeia to show that inspiration had struck!’, something like that!”

“Can I leave blank pages…?”

“Yes! Leaving blanks makes the pages clear and easy to read, I like it! When Raven fell down a cliff in BraveChro, the next two pages were blank, which gave me the creeps!”

Whenever Hiyuki asked worriedly, Ao would answer with a smile.

“The good thing about light novels is that anything goes, the formatting is really liberal. Writing style that breaks convention makes the reader excited. So just do anything you want to, write whatever you wish! Professional writers might have restrictions, but Hyonomiya is a manuscript submitter! Just write the things you like would do. I hope you can put some thoughts into how you can convey this feeling

to the people reading your work.”

“What do I need to do… to convey them?”

Pushed by Ao’s aura, Hiyuki widened her eyes as Ao nodded at her strongly.

“That’s right! Don’t hold back on the things you want to do, enjoy the moment with excitement. What do you need to do to share this emotions with the readers? You have to work hard, think over your words and study your presentation. Then it wouldn’t be a shallow writing style. If a screener critiques that the style is shallow, just ignore it with a smile.”

Sakutaro answered unwaveringly that he will curse and swear at the monitor and forget about it when his work was harshly criticized because he had plenty of research and troubles under his belt before his latest work.

If they want to critique, let them critique, that’s the method I will choose.

Ao didn’t want Hiyuki to be as thick skinned as Sakutaro, but in order to build her confidence so she can do the things she wished to do, Ao wanted to help her.

Hiyuki listened to Ao in a daze, then nodded stiffly.

“I… I will do my best.”

“Great, that’s the spirit.”

Ao continued giving specific advice with a smile. The things he could talk about were limited as he wasn't a writer, but he did all he could in telling Hiyuki how he felt as a screener.

“I hope you use varying font sizes boldly, but overusing it would diminish the impact on the reader. I think it would be better to use it only if necessary for the best effect. For example, in ‘The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero, demon king and the emperor of a harem paradise’ there was an entire page in super large font stating ‘I am already dead’. I think that is great, and will give a heavy impact on the readers. Please use this for the prologue this time too.”

“Huh?”

Hiyuki looked confused.

“Er… Erm, I thought I overdid it…”

“Not at all! Or rather, I think you should use two pages and present it in a double page spread.”

“…!”

“But the entries can only be single pages, so there is no point in doing this. It’s a pity, but let’s just use one page.”

“C-Can I really do that?”

“Yes! Furthermore, in order to highlight this contrast, how about describing in a more standard wording for the first page? Starting the story with the main character getting into an accident is a common trope and easy to understand, I suggest you write it the same way. Keep the part where he apologize to the person who knocked him down in his heart. Personally, I would suggest describing this part in detail, but don’t use onomatopoeia, multiple punctuation and varying font size, just describe it plainly. When the reader turn the page, they would see an entire page filled with the giant words ‘I am already dead’, which will bring out the contrast. This will definitely surprise them.”

Hiyuki’s expression brightened gradually.

“Yes… Yes, I will give it a try.”

After that, whenever Hiyuki finish a chapter, Ao would bring the data stick home, print it out to read, then give feedback to Hiyuki.

The prologue was rewritten four times.

“When judging if a work should progress to the second round, the beginning plays a big part. It has to give the impression ‘hey, this manuscript might make it into the second round’. The screener will read with this idea in mind if there are no mistakes in the script. My personal experience is that the chance of it getting into the second round is high. On the other hand, if the opening is normal and doesn’t flow well, the screener will think ‘This probably can’t make it’ as they

read. Even if it gets better in the middle, given the choice of manuscripts about the same quality, the screeners will choose the one with the better opening. Yes, the writing is cleaner and easier to read after the second amendment. There are still room for improvement. Maybe we can work on the content, for example…”

The two of them were now regulars in this cafe in the alley. Hiyuki listened carefully as she looked with serious eyes at Ao through the steam of her chrysanthemum tea. Her lips with a mole besides it were tightly shut and she had a face of concentration, as if she was looking at the blackboard in class, which seem cold.

However—

“Cyan’s line here show how kind she was, this is very well written.”

When Ao complimented the heroine, Hiyuki’s pale cheeks filled with colour, and a smile appears on her lips.

Whenever Hiyuki smiled calmly like this, Ao would feel a stir in his heart and be filled with joy.

He hoped that Hiyuki could smile more.

Contrary to her mature and aloof aura about her, Hiyuki was worried about anything she did, a girl who lacked self confidence. This surprised Ao.

Someone as pretty as Hyonomiya with good grades should have higher self esteem…

If Hiyuki can smile so naturally in the classroom, that will be wonderful. Our classmates who call Hiyuki 'Ice Maiden' would definitely want to be close to Hiyuki.

Only Ao knew about her charm, and he wanted everyone to know too; at the same time, he wanted to keep this smile as a secret. His felt conflicted.

"The multiple punctuations here is good, it brought out the noisy feeling of the pedestrian gathering. If you can add more description about the streets, it will be easier to leave an impression on the readers."

"Yes…"

Hiyuki made notes on the manuscript with her Kitefin shark mechanical pencil.

"The Kitefin shark Lessie who became the main character Subaru's companion is a great character. He is a little testy, but has a gentle personality. If you make him fidget when he gets embarrassed, it will definitely be moe. For example, splashing the water with his tail."

"Yes."

"Cyan's companion Jacqueline might be unreasonable and worrisome, but she has a good heart. How overjoyed she gets after getting her favourite chocolate biscuit from Cyan, that's wonderful. Do add more description here."

"… Yes."

“I also like the post office manager Jester. Do add a small scene for the steady and reliable Jester to leave an impression on the readers. It make it more more believable on the scene when Jester lend his aid in the second half of the story.”

“I understand.”

“All of Cyan’s friends are good people, and all of them support Subaru’s love in secret, which feels very warming. Instead of multiple punctuation marks, it will feel more immersive if you add in more dialogue. Also, I think describing this part in detail would leave a deeper impression than using onomatopoeia. On the other hand, using more onomatopoeia in the shark racing scene would be more impactful.”

“……”

“Ah, Hyonomiya-san, if you have other ideas, you don’t need to force yourself.”

“No, not at all.”

Hiyuki shook her head frantically.

“I think Kazetani-kun’s advice are all worth thinking through and is on point… And thank you for your compliments…”

Hiyuki’s cheek turned flushed from embarrassment.

“I am just saying whatever comes to mind.”

“… Yes.”

Hiyuki nodded with her face red.

Her lips with a mole besides it broke into a smile.

“I know that you are not doing this out of courtesy, Kazetani-kun… is just this type of person.”

“Hmm? What kind of person did you think I am?”

Ao was a bit concerned and asked. Hiyuki answered slowly with a calmly:

“No matter what kind of work… or person, or items… you will find the good points and love them…”

"Huh, is that so? It’s not like I am fine with anything.”

Hiyuki looked at Ao with sparkling eyes, which made his heart race.

“Kazetani-kun… there isn’t anyone you hate right?”

“I haven’t met anyone who made me that mad yet… But there are times when I feel unhappy and angry.”

“No matter how childish or boring a story is, Kazetani-kun can enjoy it…”

— Is it interesting, Ao?

— Yes! Every one of it is interesting!

While he was reading the manuscripts on the floor of Sakutaro's home engrossingly, Ao answered Sakutaro without any hesitation. For some reason, he remembered that scene.

No matter what kind of work it was, Ao would feel excited and find it interesting.

Works that had yet to mature, the immature parts. Works with flaws, the shortcomings itself. Well written works, it would be the techniques

No matter what kind of work it was, they had their own merits, and Ao would flip through the pages cheerfully. Ao didn't understand the feeling of being bored of the things he read.

— Is that so… All of them are interesting?

Sakutaro muttered, his voice and expression seemed dim and bitter.

At this moment, on the side of the steam that rose from the full cup of golden chrysanthemum tea, Hiyuki looked straight into Ao's eyes. Like Sakutaro back then, her eyes were dim and bitter.

"Kazetani-kun…"

Hiyuki mumbled in a sad voice.

Why is Hyonomiya-san looking at me like that? Why does she look so lonely?

“You are… a broad minded person.”

Ao felt his chest ache.

Why is his heart aching? He didn’t understand at all.

Hiyuki was praising him, but she didn’t look happy at all. It was the same for Ao, he wasn’t happy and felt a strong sense of unease instead.

“Thank you. This is the first time someone told me that.”

He pretended to be shy and averted his eyes from Hiyuki.

Hiyuki fell silent too.

“……”

“Erm, where were we? Right, we were talking about the shark race. Heighten the atmosphere with onomatopoeia, and add in more detail for this part.”

To brush away the awkward atmosphere, Ao said in a very cheerful tone.

“Hyonomiys-san does a lot of research when you describe things. Starting from the external characteristics, you would then move on to

the structural features— such a descriptive style is popular nowadays. When the enemy debut in battle scenes, such a style makes it easy for the reader to comprehend and is very effective. However, do you want to try a slightly different style this time?”

“How should I… do that?”

“For example, when you write about Kitefin sharks, you will start by writing ‘Kitefin sharks are…’ and so on, then explain the appearance and behavior of the Kitefin sharks.”

“… Yes.”

“You can add dynamic description to it, like how gracefully the tail of a Kitefin shark moves, how fast it break through the waves, how it’s dorsal fin looks like. It will give the feeling that the reader is watching the shark race together with the main character.”

Hiyuki frowned.

“I only saw them once when I was little… Moving sharks… The sharks on pictures can’t move…”

“How about searching for videos of Kitefin sharks in the web cafe? Ah, instead of that—”

Ao took out his phone and made a search.

Kitefin shark, Aquarium. Using these key words and his location, Ao found some results and smiled.

“Got it, we can go to this aquarium by riding the train for about an hour. There seems to be Kitefin sharks there, do you want to take a look together on our next day off?”

Ao showed the screen of his phone to Hiyuki. Hiyuki opened her lips that had a small mole besides it, and looked anxious.

“N-Next day off…?”

“Ah… Hyonomiya-san, can you go out on non school days?”

Ao heard that Hiyuki lived with her grandmother who was really strict. They would be chatting happily about novels, but when the time for her curfew drew near, Hiyuki would check her watch worryingly, which was telling of how much she feared her grandmother.

Hiyuki once muttered: “Grandmother… Really hates me… No matter what I do, it displeases her…”

When Ao asked: “Did you quarrel with your grandmother?”, Hiyuki would shake her head frantically with a flushed face: “Sorry…” And went silent, refusing to say more...

Another time, she said with a dark expression and tears in her eyes:

“… Grandmother’s hand… is scary… so cold, wrinkled and hard…”

She also shut her mouth and lowered her head that time.

Is Hyonomiya-san's low self esteem caused by her grandmother…

He became concerned when he thought about it.

Maybe she couldn't enjoy herself on days off because she feared her grandmother would scold her.

While Ao was worrying for her, Hiyuki shook her head.

She lowered her long eyelashes and said with her face red:

"I-It's fine… I-I want to go. I will be troubling you."

Chapter 3: The Loneliness of the Kitefin Shark

Sunday, the weather in the morning that felt really comfortable.

Is it alright for me to ask a girl out so casually? The two of us going out on a non school day, it feels just like a date… No, I just think that watching a Kitefin shark swimming in person would be a good reference for Hyonomiya-san… I shouldn't have any ulterior motives…

He thought as his cheeks turned hot. Ao came to the station where they were going to meet, and found Hiyuki in casual wear waiting for him there.

It would be June soon, and everyone was wearing short sleeves. Hiyuki also wore a light blue short sleeved dress. The design might be simple, but the refreshing and elegant colour suited Hiyuki. The way her long brown hair draped lightly over her dress was so beautiful, it gave Ao a shock.

People who passed by open their eyes wide.

"A celebrity?"

"It's a beauty."

They whispered among themselves.

It was too reckless to ask such a pretty girl after all, Ao thought as his heartbeat became faster.

“Sorry, Hyonomiya-san, did you wait long?”

He called out to her a bit nervously. Hiyuki answered with a cold expression:

“No.”

Then averted her eyes.

Ara… Why is she angry?

When they meet up at the cafe and Hiyuki arrived first, Ao who came later would say: “Sorry.” Hiyuki’s lips with a mole besides it would turn into a smile, and she would answer: “I just… reached here too.”

Am I that late?

He peaked at the clock in the station, there was two minutes to go before the agreed time. Ao wondered if he had gotten the time wrong as the two of them passed through the ticket counter and boarded the

train.

Inside the train car, Hiyuki hugged the bag on her knees tightly and lowered her head.

“It’s great that the weather is nice.”

“……”

“It’s my first time seeing Kitefin sharks.”

“……”

“I heard that there is a dolphin performance.”

“……”

Ao kept finding things to talk about, but Hiyuki just nodded stiffly and muttered something that was barely audible. They couldn’t keep the conversation going at all.

Is she really angry?

Ao didn’t know the reason.

In the cafe, Hiyuki talked a little stiffly, but they could still keep a conversation. Seeing her lower her face coldly like this put Ao at a loss.

Asking her to out to an aquarium is too nosy of me after all. What did she tell her grandmother about going out on a non school day? Or does she not like going out with me…?

Ao was really worried.

Considering Hiyuki’s character, she probably couldn’t reject someone even if she didn’t want to go.

“Hyonomiya-san, you look a little listless, are you feeling unwell?”

Ao was concerned and asked. Hiyuki shook her head.

“No…”

She answered quietly with a stiff tone and her fingers applied even more force as she fell into silence.

“……”

Amidst the heavy atmosphere, the two of them arrived at the aquarium and went through the entrance. It was Sunday, so there were many parents holding the hands of their children strolling around.

The light in the aquarium were dark blue, making it look like a blue maze. On the other side of the glass were stingrays spreading their flat body like a cape, a school of tuna with silver glittering scales, angel fish with bright stripes, Indian vagabond butterfly fish and emperor angelfish swimming leisurely.

Ao heard often that the aquarium was a sacred ground for first dates. It won’t be affected by the weather, the wait wasn’t long, and one could chat about the fishes, so they didn’t need to worry about having nothing to say. Even if they kept quiet, they could watch the fishes, so things won’t get awkward.

This is not a date with Hyonomiya-san… I can’t keep a conversation even if we talk about fishes, and it is awkward to keep quiet… Hyonomiya-san seemed like she is awkward too.

Ao took a peek beside him, and Hiyuki was staring at the water tank with her mouth tightly shut. Under the shine of the blue light, the profile of her pale face looked more uptight and strict than usual, she

was definitely not enjoying the sight of the fishes.

On the other side of Ao, a pair of high school couple was flirting with each other.

“Yoshi-kun the stripes on the zebra angelfish are so cute.”

“I think Saya is cuter.”

“Yoshi-kun, you are so bad. Ah, look, the two fish are kissing.”

“Let’s kiss too.”

“Yeah.”

Wait! We are still beside you! And the fish that are kissing are actual male fish fighting for territory, there are explanations right here──

Ao was anxious.

The girl closed her eyes as if she was waiting for the kiss. The boy leaned over and their lips drew closer.

Uwah──

What should I do? Move away from them? How should I tell Hyonomiya-san? The couple beside us are kissing, so let's go somewhere else── I can't say that!

Hiyuki seemed to notice that couple too. Holding her bag close to her chest, she lowered her head embarrassedly.

Hyonomiya-san must have heard that.

As Ao was panicking, the faces of the couple got closer gradually. When the pink kissing fish touch lips, the couple's faces overlapped.

"~~~~"

"....."

Hiyuki slumped her shoulders and remained still. The couple only kissed for a few seconds, but Ao felt it was like forever, Hiyuki probably felt the same way.

"Let's go there next."

"I want to eat sunfish bun." <TL:マンボウ饅頭>

The couple left lovingly.

“.....”

“.....”

Ao and Hiyuki stood before the fish tank with their face red.

On the other the side of the glass, the kissing fish were still kissing.

“I… I wonder where are the Kitefin sharks?”

Ao squeezed out these words as if he had trouble breathing.

“...I-I think, they are over there?”

Hiyuki kept her head low, and said in a volume that was barely audible.

That was the direction the couple was headed, thus it would be dangerous to go that way now.

“L-Let’s stay here for a while longer.”

“Yes… Yes.”

Hiyuki nodded stiffly. And so, the two were silent once again… At this moment, Hiyuki suddenly said:

“I-I am sorry… Kazetani-kun.”

Ao turned in surprise, and Hiyuki kept her head down with an expression on the verge of tears, with the mole besides her lips also trembling. This shocked Ao even more.

“Why are you apologizing, Hyonomiya-san? Do you know that couple?”

Ao asked a completely unrelated question by accident, which made Hiyuki furrowed her brows deeper, and she gripped her bag tighter.

“No… Not that, this… this is the first time I went out with a classmate… I am happy and full of anticipation… but nervous… My face is stiff… I can’t talk at all…”

Ao felt as if someone punched him in the face.

I see, Hyonomiya’s face is tense because she is nervous, not because she is angry.

She was probably feeling apologetic, Hiyuki’s eyes were welling with tears.

“Kazetani-kun kept talking to me on the train too, but I couldn’t answer properly either… Kazetani-kun must be feeling… feeling very uncomfortable… I thought I would get better in the aquarium, but I still couldn’t speak properly, so I kept quiet…”

Their classmates hailed Hiyuki as the ‘Ice Maiden’ and watched her from afar.

Everyone thought that Hiyuki’s expression was frosty and her eyes cold. Her lips with a mole near it never opened, so they felt that she didn’t want anything to do with normal students.

Because Hyonomiya Hiyuki was a lofty person.

But the real Hyonomiya-san is actually a conservative and timid person who wants to be good friends with everyone.

He was the only one who knew that Hiyuki was such a girl.

Hiyuki was sorry for acting this way, that’s why her face turned stiff

and she couldn’t talk properly. Ao lamented to himself why he didn’t notice this.

Ao bowed towards Hiyuki.

“I should be the one to apologize!”

“Why do Kazetani need to apologize? T-The one who was wrong is me.”

Hiyuki respond flusteredly.

“No! I am wrong too, this is my first time going out alone with a girl, so I don’t know anything.”

“That can’t be, isn’t Kazetani-kun really popular?”

“Huhh?”

“In class, you are always… chatting with the girls, and get along well with them.”

Hiyuki lowered her gaze again with a sad expression, making Ao panic.

“That’s just idle chat.”

“But, when Kazetani enter the classroom in the morning, the girls will say good morning to you… Not just the girls, the boys will… gather around Kazetani-kun… Everyone likes Kazetani-kun…”

Hiyuki’s voice gradually became depressing.

Hiyuki always entered the classroom just before the lesson starts for self study in the morning and lunch break.

The students would gather with their friends and chat noisily. Hiyuki didn’t talk to anyone, nobody greeted her too. She always kept her back straight as she walked coldly into the classroom and took her seat.

Ao didn’t think people hung around him because he was popular. But in Hiyuki’s eyes, she was very envious that he could chat with the girls, and felt sad about it.

Hiyuki stood before the tank with her head down and placed her hand on the glass. The colourful tropical fishes danced around her fingers.

“Our classmates greet me in the morning because I said good morning to them first. Hyonomiya-san, try greeting everyone too. Our classmates will then say good morning to you too.”

Hiyuki made a face of disbelief.

“I-Impossible… I will just spoil everyone’s mood.”

Ao replied with a cheery smile.

“Not at all. Ahh, why not greet me first. If you do that, I will say good morning to you in a loud voice!”

Hiyuki was still looking at Ao with uneasy eyes.

“If… If I say good morning before everyone in class, Kazetani will say good morning to me too…?”

“Of course.”

Ao confirmed brightly. Hiyuki seemed to be on the verge of tears as she lowered her gaze.

If she gets close to me in front of everyone, others might notice that she is writing light

novels, is she worried about that?

Normally, Hiyuki would never talk to Ao, or meet his eyes.

Ao thought that Hiyuki was being cautious and shy, but it might not be so simple.

“If Hyonomiya-san is willing, you can talk to me anytime. Also, I will greet Hyonomiya-san starting from tomorrow.”

Hiyuki’s shoulders trembled, and she looked at Ao.

“We meet after school every day, and even visited an aquarium on a Sunday. Isn’t it weird that we ignore each other in class completely?”

Ao said shyly. Hiyuki looked at him with her eyes red, but her expression was different from before.

“Well, only if Hyonomiya-san doesn’t dislike that.

Hiyuki shook her head.

“I don’t mind.”

She then continued quietly:

“It… makes me glad.”

Hiyuki lowered her red eyes, her lips with a cute mole besides it broke into a smile, and Ao’s heart skipped a beat.

Wonderful, she finally smiled.

Ao was elated too. At the same time, Hiyuki’s expression was too cute, making Ao’s face heat up and his chest thumped wildly.

“We should find the Kitefin sharks soon.”

Ao suggested a little embarrassedly, Hiyuki nodded and answered shyly:

“… Yes.”

That couple wasn’t at the kitefin shark tank.

Ao stood together with Hiyuki, watching the blue seawater through the transparent glass.

“So that’s a kitefin shark, uwah, it’s huge, and looks strong.”

Its back was covered in grey skin that looked like crude armour, the tip of its dorsal fin was shimmering with white light. As it moved its body slowly, the lofty Kitefin shark advancing in the water was just like the patterns on Hiyuki’s mechanical pencil, rolling its large blue eyes.

The eyes looked empty and devoid of light, but it emitted a strong aura. Its eyes that were akin to the bottomless sea did not look at Ao and Hiyuki as it swam between the anemone and the corals. The way large fish swam under water seemed effortless and graceful.

Hiyuki stared at the Kitefin shark with her translucent eyes too. She was probably thinking about how she could write about the sharks, showing a serious and unapproachable expression.

Hyonomiya-san is like a Kitefin shark...

If he say a girl looked like a shark, it would definitely earn her ire, so Ao didn’t say it out. But the lofty and graceful aura, the cold eyes that seemed deep at a glance— the overwhelming sense of presence and beautiful appearance seemed to overlap with Hiyuki who was standing near it.

“Hyonomiya-san, when did you start liking Kitefin sharks?”

Ao asked, and Hiyuki’s shoulders trembled.

“Ah, my bad, did I interrupt your observation?”

“… No.”

Hiyuki shook her head stiffly, and said timidly:

“Kitefin sharks… are fish… related to my mother…”

“Related to your mother?”

“… When I was three… My mother died of illness… Before she was hospitalized, she brought me to the aquarium… to watch the Kitefin sharks. My mother bought my Kitefin shark mechanical pencil for me right then.”

Memories about her mother… I see. Hyonomiya-san’s mother passed away when she was young...

Hiyuki muttered lonelily. Ao listened attentively and felt his chest constricted.

Hiyuki reversed the term Yoroizame (Kitefin shark) into Sameyoroi, and used it as her pen name. She also wrote about Kitefin sharks in her works, not because she liked them, but because they remind her of her mother.

What about Hyonomiya-san's father? Living somewhere else? Or did he pass away too?

He was concerned about the circumstances of her family, but he couldn't ask it out loud.

When she was talking about her mother, Hiyuki's eyes were cold and filled with sadness, making her look more lonely. As she watched the beautiful shark with cold eyes swimming by itself, Hiyuki mumbled in a soft voice:

"Kitefin shark… is an organism living in the deep sea, and won't go near shallow waters… And they don't move in groups… always acting alone…"

Its large round eyes would never look this way. The small fishes swam in schools, anemones and corals grew together, but Kitefin sharks always swam alone.

“That’s why… the story I wrote… is all a sham…”

In Hiyuki’s settings, the world the main character Subaru arrived in was a cluster of islands in the sea, a fairy tale like nation where the citizens commuted by Kitefin sharks. Kitefin sharks loved sweet desserts and if they could form a mental link with a human, it was possible to communicate telepathically.

Also, everyone in that nation had a Kitefin shark of their own.

Not as a pet or a livestock, but as an important companion.

In the beginning, Subaru didn’t have a shark of his own. But he met the aloof Kitefin shark Heinrich, who ignored Subaru at first, but got closer to him over time.

And so, Subaru gradually formed a mental link with Heinrich and succeeded in hearing his voice, becoming unique partners.

In Hyonomiya-san’s work, all the Kitefin sharks are gentle, appear in shallow often. The sharks would marry and raise families, and maintain cordial relations with humans...

But all that was a lie.

The real Kitefin sharks don’t act like that, Hiyuki’s sad eyes seemed to be saying so.

His chest hurt as if something was squeezing it— But Ao worked hard to not let his feelings show— He said in a loud, cheerful voice:

“Well then, the Kitefin sharks in Hyonomiya-san’s work are special Kitefin sharks.”

“Huh?”

“They are Kitefin sharks that will swim in shallow waters, get along with humans, and help humans. They’re the best kind of Kitefin sharks.”

Hiyuki looked at Ao in surprise.

The cold aura around Hiyuki faded, and she had an innocent expression just like a high school girl. Ao smiled, thinking that Hiyuki looked really cute like that.

“Light novels are very liberal, you can write about anything right? So there is no problem if there is a world with such Kitefin sharks, and personally, I find it fun. Maintaining a level of realism in the story

might be important, but I like mixing a bit of fiction into the real parts.”

“……”

Hiyuki stared at Ao with an innocent expression again. At this moment, a family with a child in tow walked over.

“Ah, it’s a shark, awesome!”

“That is a Kitefin shark.”

“Mom, I want a Kitefin shark.”

“We can’t do that alright, it won’t fit in our bathtub.”

They chatted leisurely.

Hiyuki’s eyes redden and she sniveled.

She then averted her head anxiously, sniveled a few more times before turning back to face Ao.

“That’s right… there must be Kitefin sharks like that.”

She blushed as she spoke softly, and smiled.

Seeing the lips with a mole nearby break into a smile, Ao smiled too.

After that, they toured the aquarium one round, and ate lunch at the underwater restaurant. All the walls in the aquarium were made of glass, and they chatted and ate happily in the company of sea creatures.

“The kid’s meal… is so cute.”

On the fish shaped plates were little pieces of sausage cut into the shape of octopus, omelette rice with a fish drawn in tomato sauce on it. Hiyuki muttered to herself as she looked at the children’s meal picture.

“Want to order it?”

Ao said in a mischeivous tone.

“Hmmm, b-but…”

Hiyuki panicked.

“I will order it too, let’s try it.”

“K-Kazetani-kun.”

“Hi, I would like two set of children’s set meal.”

Ao told a waitress in a loud voice.

“Sorry, only students below primary school can order that set.”

The waitress rejected him politely.

“Ah, is that so? Sorry, ehh ── Please wait a moment!”

“Of course, please take your time to browse the menu.”

After the waitress left, Ao covered his face with his palms.

“Uwah, that’s embarrassing. My face is hot.”

He heard a cute laughter. Ao shifted his hands and saw Hiyuki laughing.

“Ah, sorry, but… you are so cute.”

Cute!

A girl called him cute.

That was a huge blow for guys, but Hiyuki’s gaze was sweet enough to make one melt away. The smile on her lips with a mole besides it made Ao feel restless again.

That might be embarrassing… But I get to see such a cute expression from Hyonomiya-san, so it is worth it.

“This is a secret between me and Hyonomiya-san.”

After hearing Ao say that, Hiyuki nodded happily:

“… Yes.”

Ao felt his face burning, and his heart rate accelerating.

“Ah, what should we order?”

He looked at the menu.

Ao chose grilled oyster and seafood soba, Hiyuka picked baked crab, and the couple discussed about the unfinished manuscript as they digged in.

“Are the Kitefin sharks good reference?”

“Yes, they are very useful.”

“I will give you another suggestion. A descriptive style that leaves a deep impression has one important point.”

“What is that point?”

“Showing the frame of mind of the person watching the scene.”

“… Frame of mind?”

Hiyuki looked at Ao with her transparent eyes.

“Yes. When you are sad, the scenery you see have the colour of sadness, when you are happy, everything looks bright and shiny right? So, how is the character viewing the scene feeling at the moment? If you write with this in mind, the scene and the emotions of the

character would be in sync, and the readers would resonate in the same way. In a love novel, if you describe the charm of the girls from the perspective of the boy who loved her, she would be the most enchanting. The person you like would be the most charming person in the world, right?”

Hiyuki slumped her body a little and averted her eyes by a bit, then looked at Ao with unnatural movements and asked:

“… Loving a person not because he is charming… But find him charming because you love him?”

“Either way is possible.”

Ao stated directly, and Hiyuki slumped her body again.

Ao continued:

“You can think of it this way: When you think the other party is charming, that’s when you fell in love with him.”

“I-Is that so…?”

Hiyuki seemed to be panicking for some reason.

“It will be perfect if it is like a light novel where ‘everything seems to be sparkling’.”

Hiyuki slumped her shoulders with her face red, and started wolfing down her baked crab.

“T-The sauce is thick and nice, very delicious.”

“Is that so? Great.”

“Hmm hmm.”

Hiyuki kept nodding her head as she ate her baked crab while blushing.

There was a dolphin performance besides the pool in the afternoon, Ao and Hiyuki went to watch it together.

The dolphins drew a beautiful blue arc as they leapt out of the pool. Ao and the children cheered, while Hiyuki was engrossed and looked happy.

The trainer held a bait up high, and the dolphin bowed politely. At that

moment, Hiyuki sighed sweetly.

“So cute…”

When she muttered that, Ao remembered Hiyuki calling him cute earlier. Her eyes that could melt anyone appeared before him again, making Ao’s heart race.

— She is… really cute.

Uwah.

The dolphin swam to the depths of the pool.

“Everybody, let’s shout the names of the dolphins. The first one is Yamato.”

The trainer told the audience.

“Ready, set…”

She then gave the cue to prepare them.

“Let’s shout too.”

“Hmm?”

“Here, let’s shout together.”

Hiyuki opened her eyes wide in surprise.

Ao shouted with the children:

“Ya— Mato!”

Influenced by Ao, Hiyuki shouted together one beat later:

“… Mato!”

The voice was soft and shy, but Ao heard it clearly.

Splashes burst from the water surface, and the dolphin leapt higher than them. The emotions of the children erupted and Hiyuki smiled.

“Next will be Yukari. Ready— go.”

“Yu— Kari!

“... Kari!”

Hiyuki shouted, louder this time.

And with each subsequent dolphin, Hiyuki’s expression became more cheerful as she shouted the dolphin’s name, making Ao’s heart beat fast.

When the performance was over, Hiyuki’s face was red with excitement.

“That was fun!”

She said in a bright tone.

Later, the two of them shopped at the souvenir store, browsing toy fishes and postcards. Ao bought mechanical pencils with dolphin patterns for the twins back home, one pink and one light blue.

The Kitefin shark mechanical pencil Hiyuki’s mother bought for her was also being sold. When she saw that—

“They are still selling it.”

Hiyuki smiled happily.

She bought an album of the fishes to use as reference.

“Do you have curfews on days off too? We should go back soon.”

“Yes… But, one last thing… I want to see the Kitefin shark again, is that alright?”

Hiyuki asked timidly.

“Alright, let’s go.”

The crowd was thinner this time. There wasn’t anyone before the Kitefin shark tank.

Ao and Hiyuki stood side by side in the corridor illuminated by blue light as they watched the Kitefin shark. The surroundings were really quiet. They could hear footsteps from the distance and the voices of children, but that accentuated how serene this area was.

Hiyuki’s pale profile turned towards Ao as her transparent eyes watched the Kitefin sharks swimming slowly.

Its dorsal fin shining with a white glow sliced through the waters silently, as the shark gracefully moved its long, grey body. Just what were the powerful, lofty Kitefin shark’s large eyes were looking at?

The lonely king of the ocean that won’t appear in shallow waters or move in groups—

“We… seem to be under the sea.”

Hiyuki muttered.

Under the shining ray of lights, Ao and Hiyuki were dyed in the colour of the ocean.

“… That’s right.”

It was probably so quiet and serene because they were under the sea.

It felt as if he was alone in an alternate way together with Hiyuki. Hiyuki probably felt the same.

“I… don’t want to go home…”

Ao thought that he misheard.

“I just want… to stay here like this.”

The dream like whisper came from Ao’s side again.

Ao turned towards Hiyuki, the pale Hiyuki basking in the blue light, who was lowering her head sadly. Her lowered gaze was wavering, her lips with a mole besides it were pale, her slender fingers held her light blue dress tightly… As if she was going to melt into the blue light…

“…Hyonomiya-san.”

Ao called out to her hesitantly.

Hiyuki lifted her head as if she just snapped out of her trance.

“I’m sorry.”

Her cheeks blushing slightly, she continued frantically:

“T-That wasn’t what I was saying, I was thinking about Subaru… the scene after his date with Cyan, as they were preparing to go home, that must be how he felt…”

“Oh, so that’s what it was. You gave me a scare.”

Ao sighed in relief.

“I am really sorry.”

When she bowed, her lustrous brown hair fell from her shoulders.

“Not at all. I think the date besides the sea would be a wonderful scene.”

Ao said with a smile, and Hiyuki showed a dazed expression. Shortly after, her lips with a mole besides it broke into a smile.

“Yes.”

She answered.

“Let’s go back.”

“Yes.”

Hiyuki was all smiles even after leaving the aquarium.

On the train back, the scene outside the windows were steadily dyed red. The two of them sat in adjacent seats with their shoulders almost touching, their heartbeat racing as they conversed quietly.

“… Kazetani-kun, you can find joy in any work you read… Are there any work that doesn’t sit well with you?”

“There is, like novels printed on A4 paper using manuscript formatting which makes it a press, the ones printed directly onto A3 paper in booklet format, or works that are great but have hard to decipher handwriting. The printed ones could still be read, but it is troubling if I can’t make out the handwritten ones. I will mark the words with a question mark, try to read the synopsis, but still have many parts I don’t understand… If I really can’t make any headway, I will leave a note saying ‘I am sorry, I am unable to read the wordings on this work’, then send it back to the publisher along with the works that didn’t make the cut. Of all the manuscripts I screened, that was the only one I rejected without reading it… Even now, I wonder if that was a timeless masterpiece, if I could only decipher it…”

However, the staff in the editorial department probably couldn’t read it too.

Hiyuki opened her eyes in surprise, then mumbled after Ao finished.

“That… is a bit different… from works you don’t like.”

After that, she asked:

“Well, what type of stories… do you like the most?”

“Compared to contemporary literature and classics, I very much prefer light novels.”

“Within light novels, which type do you prefer?”

Hiyuki asked vigorously.

“Well… Probably stories with foreshadowing.”

“Foreshadowing…?”

“Yes, there are many genres of light novels, if I find out after reading to the later parts and ‘ah, so that is a foreshadowing’, I will feel excited, happy and moved at that moment. The same for submissions, works that uses foreshadowing well is the most exciting. It will feel like ‘ahh, so that happened to pave the way for this part’.”

“Foreshadowing… meaning that a plot point would be mentioned early for future developments, giving the readers a hint of what is to come— correct?”

“Yes, for example, the loyal subordinate of the demon king turned on him at the climax of the story and become the hero. The readers would be surprised, but they wouldn’t be able to accept it right? If an explanation is inserted at this juncture that the subordinate of the demon king only pretended to serve the demon king because his parents were murdered by the demon king, and was biding his time to bring down the demon king, it would feel very forced. But if earlier writings supported it, for example, the attitude of the subordinate seeming weird, or a prophecy about the hero having another companion, when the betrayal happens, the readers will be excited and think: ahh, so he is the last warrior!”

“… Like Leonardo in ‘BraveChro’…?”

“That’s right, Leonardo who was originally an enemy became the companion of the main character when he was in mortal danger, turning the tide of the battle completely. It gave me goosebumps. The foreshadowing was planned skillfully, I didn’t imagine that they would tie up the loose ends that way, I was completely tricked.”

“… Me too.”

“Foreshadowing is a double edged sword, if it’s too obvious, the readers would find out about future developments, so it has to be subtle. But if the readers don’t remember the foreshadowing at all, it would lose its effect. So it has to be shown to the readers openly, but not let them realize that it is a foreshadowing.”

Hiyuki muttered:

“That is difficult.”

“Yup, that’s why I feel moved when I see a well resolved foreshadowing. I like such stories a lot.”

Ao stated his words strongly. Hiyuki whose hair and eyelashes were basking in the light orange rays of the sun looked at Ao shyly.

When the train reached its stop, Ao and Hiyuki alighted together.

The outside was covered in faint lights too.

“Kazetani-kun, did you ride a bicycle to school…?”

“Yes, I parked it at school.”

“We can walk to school then…”

Hiyuki seemed happy that she could walk a bit further with Ao, her lips with a mole smiled faintly, and Ao’s heart thumped.

Under the glow of the setting sun, Hiyuki was more beautiful than normal. Her smooth hair, eyelashes, slender wrists, perfect face was sparkling…

Hmmm? Sparkling?

— It will be perfect if ‘everything seems to be sparkling’.

Ao remembered what he said at the aquarium.

Wait, this is just like a foreshadowing.

As he felt anxious and his heartbeat accelerated.

“Kazetani-kun.”

Hiyuki who was walking besides him called out with a steady voice.

It sounded sweeter than usual—

“I will work hard… and write a story with a perfect foreshadowing.”

Why did Hiyuki look so bright?

Why was he so conscious about Hiyuki?

Hiyuki’s lips with a charming mole opened shyly. She lowered her gaze slightly, and said in a soft voice as if she was confessing something important:

“I hope… Kazetani-kun… will like it.”

Ao’s heart beated heavily.

Like—— She doesn’t mean liking Hyonomiya-san, but the novel written by her right? Wait, why am I panicking?

His face was as hot as a kettle and his mind was a mess.

Hiyuki who was covered in bright lights stood beside him shyly—

“Hyonomiya-san…”

When Ao was just about to speak.

“Ao-kun!”

A sweet and clear voice echoed out.

A voice that would leave a deep impression, you would never forget after hearing it once. The owner of the voice was just as charming and seemed older than Ao, a pretty woman who seemed to be in her early twenties.

She was wearing a pink T-shirt with black prints of rabbits on it. Her chest was bountiful and she had on a hoodie jacket and a black mini skirt with lotus patterned laces usually worn by high schoolers. This dressing fit her, giving the feel that ‘she might be an adult, but she is still cute’. Her curled lashes had thick mascara on it, going for the posh look.

“Huh, Aeka…?”

She suddenly hugged Ao.

“Ao-kun, it’s too much, too much, Ao-kun.”

Her bountiful breasts pressed onto Ao’s body with her soft hands wrapped around his neck. She had a sweet fragrance about her as she cried about being too much.

“Aeka-san, calm down.”

“Erm… I…”

In contrast to the woman hugging Ao, Hiyuki said in a barely audible voice.

That’s right! Hyonomiya-san is right beside us!

Hiyuki furrowed her brows and her cheeks blushed.

“S-Sorry…”

Hiyuki said before Ao did, passed right by Ao and ran in the street as the evening turned into night.

“Ah, Hyonomiya-san!”

Ao called out, but Hiyuki didn’t turn back.

Chapter 4: The Small Things In Everyday Life, A Sweet and Silly Drama

Is that pretty lady Kazetani-kun's girlfriend…?

Hiyuki ran as if she was escaping from Ao's side and returned to her old mansion. She sat before her old desk inside the tatami laden room and sulked.

Not a… high schooler, is she in college…? Maybe she is a working adult… Older than Kazetani-kun, her breasts are so big, and she looks so cute… Her clothes are fancy and cute too… Her voice is sweet and pleasant… She addressed Kazetani-kun as Ao-kun.

When Ao invited Hiyuki to the aquarium, she felt as if she was in a dream.

She had been thinking since the day before on what she should wear. Should she prepare a lunch box? It would be a long train ride, what should she talk to Kazetani-kun about? Because she was too worried and nervous, she couldn't look at him in the face when Ao arrived with a bright smile, and she felt her heart beating intensely.

Kazetani-kun looks different than when he is in school.

He merely changed from uniform to casual wear, but Hiyuki was really

conscious about this part and her heart raced.

In the train, Ao was worried about Hiyuki and kept finding topics to chat with her, but she couldn’t answer properly and her expression became stiffer and stiffer. She hated that part of herself and was at a loss on what to do, and ended up venting all those emotions on Ao.

Hiyuki was sure that Ao must think of her as a troublesome and moody girl. He must regret asking her out to the aquarium. He would definitely not go on a date with her again.

Hiyuki’s was on the verge of breaking down with her chest overflowing with negative emotions, but Ao apologized to her first.

Kazetani-kun… is really gentle.

That was how he usually was.

Always smiling calmly, greeting everyone with a loud voice, listening to others happily and giving appropriate responses to prompt the speaker to continue.

That’s why the classmates around Ao all seemed so happy, and both boys and girls would talk to Ao.

Ao wouldn’t say anything malicious or show preferential treatment. He was cheerful, gentle and fair to everyone.

Because Ao was such a person, that was why he could accept Hiyuki who was ostracised in class and avoided by everybody.

—Hyonomiya-san used the pen name Yoroisame and submitted the work ‘The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero, demon king and the emperor of a harem paradise’ into the contest — I saw this manuscript when I was working as a screener

When Hiyuki heard Ao said that, she felt embarrassed and shaken, so she answered ‘you got the wrong person’ and ran away. After school, she waited for Ao at the bicycle lot, mustered up her courage to talk to him and received his kind reply.

Just one work is fine, please teach me how to write light novels. Ao even accepted such a shameless request with a smile. They arranged to meet in a cafe after school for the next two months where Ao would teach her on writing her manuscript.

Kazetani-kun… is really kind and has a warm, gentle heart… He said that I can use varying font size, multiple punctuation, onomatopoeia and leave blanks freely...

No matter what, Ao won’t reject the other party outright, and will affirm with them first.

Not just light novels, but that was the way he was with his relationships with others and his attitude with life, which seemed so bright. Even though she felt this way, the pain in her chest was

agonizing.

Kazetani-kun and I… are complete opposites...

In the cafe that was a secret to just the two of them, Hiyuki always ordered chrysanthemum, while Ao switched up his drink every time.

They had a gap between them even in a place like this, which made Hiyuki’s heartache. Ao definitely didn’t know that.

Hiyuki yearned for Ao so much and her inferiority complex tormented her feelings really badly.

—Kazetani-kun… You are… a broad minded person.

When she muttered those words, she felt so distanced from Ao and so lonely.

But I felt really close to Kazetani-kun in the aquarium, it was so joyous.

The two of them watched the Kitefin sharks, ate together in the underwater restaurant, and shouted in the dolphin show for the first time.

She felt so happy after experiencing so many firsts.

So blissful yet so sad.

Under the glow of the blue lighting, Ao who was watching the aquarium tank beside her was dyed the same colour.

— We… seemed to be under the sea.

— … That’s right.

In that moment, she felt that she was in the same place as Ao, and was watching the same thing with same emotions. She thought that she would be pulled away from him again if they went back to land. The thought of that tore at her heart.

— I… Don’t want to go home…

She said something terrible.

— I just want… to stay here like this.

This is really embarrassing, how could I say that?

She explained hurriedly that she was conceptualizing a scene in the novel to cover it up. Even though Ao acknowledged with a smile, Hiyuki still felt her face was so hot that it could spit fire.

And after that, on the return trip back on the train, she wanted to get

a bit closer to Ao before the fun time ended, so she asked Ao what kind of novels he liked.

— Well… Probably stories with foreshadowing.

Ao answered, and so Hiyuki decided in her heart to be someone who was great at using foreshadowing, so Kazetani could read her work happily and enjoy her writing. And so, she told Ao:

— I will work hard… and write a story with a perfect foreshadowing.

— I hope… Kazetani-kun… will like it.

That was the confession that took all of Hiyuki’s effort to make.

I can’t say that I hope he will like me as a person… that’s too much to ask… at least, I hope he can like the novel I write...

What a pitiable and terrible way of thinking.

I actually said that to Kazetani-kun.

Ao made a troubled expression.

He seemed to be at a loss for words. When he was about to say something, that woman called out to him with a sweet voice, then

hugged him.

Ao called her Aeka-san

Would he address a woman he wasn’t close by their first name?

And would a woman hug a boy she wasn’t dating?

Ao didn’t seem to mind, and looked at that woman worriedly. As if he couldn’t see Hiyuki anymore.

Seeing Ao being so intimate with the woman was agonizing for Hiyuki, who ran off after saying ‘sorry’.

When she reached home, she was slightly late for her curfew. Her grandmother waiting outside the entrance asked Hiyuki sternly: ‘Why are you so late? What did you do? Is this really because of school?’

Her grandmother wouldn’t let the matter rest if she didn’t understand and manage Hiyuki’s schedule. She always wore her kimono perfectly, was tall for women her age and kept her back straight. Her grandmother glared at Hiyuki with her usual air of authority, tense face and sharp shining eyes. Hiyuki slumped her body naturally, and her soft voice turned even weaker.

Hiyuki said she rested in a shop for a while because she felt unwell. Her grandmother chided her for not returning earlier if she felt unwell.

“Are you still feeling unwell? Where?”

“Just a slight headache… But, it’s… already fine.”

Hiyuki replied and then helped her grandmother prepare dinner as usual. She sat opposite to her grandmother and ate her dinner nervously in silence. Her grandmother seasoned her food mildly, and she couldn’t tell the taste on days like this.

Her grandmother’s bony hand held her chopsticks gracefully as she ate dinner with her back straight. Hiyuki slumped her body before her grandmother and stuffed the tasteless food into her mouth.

She then put away the dishes, returned to her room alone, and started thinking deeply about what happened when she parted with him.

Hiyuki looked sadly at a photo in her hand.

When she met with something sad or unbearable, she would always look at this photo ——

On the photo was a three years old Hiyuki wearing a cute frilly blouse, a pink short dress and a flower patterned bag slung across her back.

Hiyuki was holding her mother’s hand with a slightly nervous face.

Her mother was out of the picture, only her long dress and her graceful, slender hand was visible. Her mother had pale and fragile skin, and would wear gloves on days when ultraviolet rays were strong. She was wearing one in the photo too. Hiyuki liked her mother’s smooth and fragrant gloves a lot, and would secretly wear them often.

The photo captured a water tank from the aquarium, and a grey tail with a white edge was visible. That was a Kitefin shark.

There were other photos she took with her mother, and in those pictures, both Hiyuki and her mother were smiling happily. But Hiyuki kept looking at this picture because this was the last time she went out with her mother, a memorable photo. Because she couldn’t forget what her mother said to her in front of the Kitefin shark aquarium.

With big bulging eyes, covered in grey tough hide and a mouthful of razor sharp teeth, the Kitefin shark was a malicious and scary creature to the young Hiyuki.

— Erm, mama, it’s scary…

Hiyuki hated and was afraid of this aquarium, but her mother who was always so gentle used a firm and strict voice to explain that Kitefin sharks were strong creatures that acted alone.

— You have to be strong, just like a Kitefin shark.

Her mother must have said that so suddenly because she knew she would be hospitalized soon and wasn’t long for the world.

One year ago, Hiyuki’s father fell in love with someone else and divorced her mother. Her mother sent her to a childcare center and started working. But her health was frail and doing so wrecked her body, so she went to her mother’s home with Hiyuki in tow.

Hiyuki’s grandmother lived alone in this big, old and cold mansion. In the beginning, Hiyuki lived together with her mother and grandmother. But after her mother’s health turned for the worse and she got hospitalized, she started living with her grandmother. In the end, her mother wasn’t discharged from the hospital.

Hiyuki thought that her mother knew her time was short, that’s why she told Hiyuki before the Kitefin shark tank that day that ‘you have to be strong’.

Her mother’s voice might have been strict and cold, but it sounded very sad.

After her mother passed away, whenever she looked at the photo she took back then, Hiyuki thought to herself that she was alone now and had to be strong.

Just like the Kitefin shark in the deep sea, she could survive even without companions.

Her grandmother was over seventy and was a strict person. After Hiyuki’s mother passed away, she tasked Hiyuki with many chores.

Moping the corridors with a cloth, wiping the windows, weeding the grass in the courtyard. In the spacious mansion with many rooms, these were laborious tasks.

On top of that, Hiyuki had to help in the kitchen. She cut her hand with the kitchen knife often in the beginning, and her grandmother said:

— That’s because you are using the knife wrong, it is your fault that you cut yourself, so don’t cry and beg for sympathy from others.

Her grandmother chided.

When the young Hiyuki was afraid of sleeping in a huge room.

— I will treat you as an adult, and an adult showing weakness is ugly. I won’t listen to your complaints, so prepare yourself for that.

Her grandmother brushed her off coldly.

Her grandmother’s words were always dismissive, can’t do this, can’t do that, always speaking about things that were prohibited. Even the way she held chopsticks, sat on the tatami and how to walk was strictly enforced.

When Hiyuki and the other kids went to the house of a friend she made in kindergarten to play, her grandmother would ask in detail what Hiyuki played, and what snacks they ate when she got home. After that, her grandmother would visit the other party's place with high class snacks.

— Thank you for taking care of my granddaughter. I heard she ate plenty of snacks, but children from my house must not eat desserts or cakes sold in the market, so please don't feed them to my granddaughter in the future.

This happened time and again, and in the end, no other kids invited Hiyuki to their house to play.

— Mama, you can't offer Hiyuki anything to eat.

— Hiyuki's grandmother is very strict. The kids who went to Hiyuki's house to play were scolded: Put your shoes properly! So scary. And the only snacks in their place are steamed bun and black beans which are not sweet at all and not tasty.

There weren't any kids who came to Hiyuki's place to play. In primary school, no one spoke to Hiyuki in class.

Hiyuki gradually became an introverted child, and didn't know what expression to show when she was with a crowd.

When she realized it, revising her homework with a tense face with

her mouth shut at her seat was a natural thing to do.

Things didn’t change in middle school, Hiyuki’s expression became colder and stiffer, spending her days without conversing with anyone.

During winter in her third year of middle school, she discovered light novels by chance, which injected a ray of light into Hiyuki’s grey life.

After much hesitation, she chose a book with her limited allowance and read it repeatedly after buying one.

Her grandmother thought that things like anime and manga would lead to deprivation. When Hiyuki was in primary school and received a notebook with a manga character printed on it during a sports meet, her grandmother furrowed her brows and ordered her sternly to ‘throw that away’.

If her grandmother knew that Hiyuki was reading light novels with anime style covers, she would definitely prohibit it. All of Hiyuki’s important books would probably be thrown away.

That’s why Hiyuki kept her light novels and printed manuscripts discreetly, and would never read light novels or work on her manuscripts at home.

Hiyuki decided she would read and write light novels outside, and adhered to that principle.

She probably entered her work into a newcomer contest because she wished others would know. She hoped that someone will know that she who looked gloomy, cold and boring could write a bright and cheerful story too.

She wished that others would know that even though she had never exchanged emails with friends, she still knew how to use varying sized fonts, emoticons and multiple punctuations.

But the comment sheets she received noted that: the main character was unpleasant, the story and wordings were cheap and uninteresting. Her unpleasant self could only write unpleasant stories. Hiyuki suppressed her voice to avoid her grandmother from hearing her, and cried in her blanket.

For Hiyuki who didn’t have freedom and any confidence, there was only one person who could accept her, and that was Ao.

Kazetani-kun isn’t gentle to me alone...

Ao was kind to everyone.

Everyone liked Ao. Because Ao would never hurt anyone and will always find their good points. It felt happy being with him.

If Hiyuki was a Kitefin shark in the deep ocean, then Ao must be the infinitely vast azure sky.

Kazetani is broad.

But I am narrow.

Ao won’t like someone like her. What Ao preferred were cute cheerful girls similar to him. Like the person who called out to him with a sweet voice and hugged him today.

I am just… hoping for something all by myself...

She felt she wasn’t good enough for Ao who was beloved by everyone. That’s what she thought, but maybe…

“It is enough that Kazetani-kun is willing to accompany me in writing my manuscript, I have to be content…”

She muttered to herself as she looked at the photo of her mother holding her hand with a lady-like white glove. Her eyes slowly shut and didn’t open again.

The next morning, Hiyuki came to the computer early in the morning as usual to work on her manuscript. But her fingers paused after typing a phrase, and time passed without her making much progress.

I have to go to class...

She turned off the monitor, opened the door of the computer lab and found Ao standing there with a sheepish face.

“Good morning, Hyonomiya-san”

Ao came all the way here to wait for Hiyuki and greet her, which moved Hiyuki. But she recalled immediately about the woman yesterday, and was unable to reply good morning properly.

“… Morning.”

Hiyuki mumbled in a gloomy voice, which made things awkward and uneasy. The two of them fell into silence, and Ao took the initiative to speak again.

“I am sorry about yesterday, you must be surprised by the stranger that popped up suddenly. That person is someone my uncle knew at work. From the game company I mentioned that introduced the manuscript screening work to me.”

To Hiyuki’s ears, Ao’s words were vaguer than usual.

Would someone you know at work hug your nephew out of the blue…?

When that woman with voluptuous breasts came to her mind, Hiyuki felt a stab of pain deep within her modest chest.

“… Okay.”

She muttered softly:

“... Self study is about to begin.”

And then left by herself.

Ao felt conflicted as he couldn’t explain to Hiyuki about that woman.

Hyonomiya-san seems distanced today, it feels strange...

That night, Ao was reading manuscripts in Sakutaro’s place

The publisher sent the boxes of manuscripts to Sakutaro’s place this time, so Ao screened them over there.

Usually, he would dive right into the work, but today, he realized he kept thinking about Hiyuki.

When he went to greet Hiyuki at the computer lab in the morning, she showed a cold expression, and didn’t meet Ao in the eyes.

It was the same at the cafe after school. Hiyuki who usually orders Chrysanthemum picked the bright pink rose nectar tea instead.

“Ara, not drinking Chrysanthemum today?”

When Ao said that, Hiyuki became fidgety.

“… I, I want to try something different occasionally.”

She replied in a stiff voice.

Ao looked at the print out of Hiyuki’s manuscript.

“The scene where Subaru and the heroine Cyan become aware of each other's feeling is captivating, a great sequence. I think it would be better if there are more substance. For example, explaining to the readers what attracts them to each other.”

Ao said, and Hiyuki showed a cold and gloomy face.

“Ehh, too hard to understand?”

Ao asked.

“… Can you be more specific? What do you mean?”

Hiyuki said with her eyes down.

This was the first time he heard Hiyuki reply in such an icy tone, which surprised Ao.

“How about listing out the reason they like each other. If you can describe this point clearly, then the development of their mutual love would be more convincing. First, why does Subaru like Cyan?”

“Because when he was all alone, Cyan found him.”

“Yes, after Subaru was thrown into a different world all of a sudden, the first one he met was Cyan. That is a good reason. Anything else?”

“Cyan is kind, and helped him.”

“Yes, that’s easy to get.”

“…When everyone dismissed Subaru, thinking that he is ‘different’… Only Cyan accepted him and spoke up for him.”

“I see, it is only natural to admire her then.”

“… Because Cyan taught him many things.”

“Yes, that feels right.”

Ao nodded with a smile.

“Cyan is popular, cheerful, gentle…”

Hiyuki peeked up. Her eyes that were looking at Ao seemed very depressed and sad. Ao’s chest hurt a little when he saw that. At this moment, Hiyuki moved her lips that had a mole beside it, and said softly:

“Her smile… is like the blue sky.”

She then lowered her gaze immediately.

When he saw the depressed expression Hiyuki made in that instant, Ao felt the depth of his chest squeeze tightly. His emotions wavered a little, and he said:

“The reasons Subaru likes Cyan is sufficient, anyone will definitely fall for her for these reasons.”

Hiyuki held her Kitefin shark mechanical pencil tightly and lowered her head.

“Next, let’s think of the reasons why Cyan like Subaru. What does Cyan like about Subaru?”

There was silence.

“Hyonomiya-san?”

Hiyuki still kept her mouth tightly shut, and seemed to be suffering as she kept quiet. Ao called out to her worryingly.

“… Nothing.”

She muttered.

“… Cyan, would never like… Subaru.”

Hiyuki kept her head down as she continued in a somber voice.

“Huh, why?”

Ao felt confused. If the heroine didn’t like the main character, the work would fall apart.

“… Because, no matter how much I try to think of the reason to like Subaru… I couldn’t find any of his good points… gloomy… cold… dull in conversation… sulks easily… no one likes him, he is just a weirdo who came from god knows where…”

Hiyuki’s voice and expression turned stiffer and harder. A cold light could be seen from her lowered eyes.

“It is natural for Subaru to like Cyan, but Cyan who is beloved by everyone would never like Subaru.”

Ao understood that Hiyuki had a deep emotional complex, and why she projected herself onto the lonely main character.

However, Ao didn’t understand why she became angry all of a sudden and completely dismissed the main character.

Ao felt troubled, and Hiyuki’s cheeks turned red.

“I-I… will go back for today.”

She packed her stationeries and left the shop.

She then stood up and told Ao:

“Kazetani-kun, it’s fine if you don’t greet me in the morning… Kazetani-kun and I aren’t compatible.”

Hiyuki said in a cold tone, which rendered Ao momentarily speechless.

Incompatible… well, I don't really match Hyonomiya-san at all...

Hiyuki didn't seem to be herself today, but when she said 'incompatible', Ao felt really hurt.

She doesn't need my advice for her manuscript anymore…? Did I offend Hyonomiya-san unknowingly?

If not, the introverted Hiyuki wouldn't say all that. Because Ao thought about these things over and over in his head, he took much longer than usual to finish one manuscript.

He opened the laptop he brought from home, ran the comment sheet program and prepared to type in his overall comments. However, he kept hesitating: would these words hurt the author? Would writing it this way sap the author's will to ever enter a contest again? Could he make the right call in such a condition? Maybe this work was worthy of submitting to the second round. His hands on the keyboard kept stopping.

When he first started screening, he would run into such a dilemma often. When he first started, he was too happy and submitted the manuscripts without much thought. From the second time onwards, he knew his judgement would affect the fate of the manuscripts, and the pressure would make his chest feel stuffy.

In most situations, the screeners were the only ones who would read

the manuscripts in the first round. If Ao fail the manuscript at this stage, no other screeners would ever see this manuscript again, unless the author submitted it to another contest.

He wasn’t a writer or an editor, but just a student who likes light novel. Was it really ok for Ao Kazetani to decide this?

Especially when several works were in the borderline of being ‘recommended to the second round’, Ao would lose sleep and hesitate over which work to send.

Should it be the work with better writing and structure?

Or the creative submission with immature techniques?

If the work Ao didn’t choose was a masterpiece that should win a prize—

However, the works he submitted after much hesitation had never made it past the second round. The manuscripts that won prizes in the end were those he felt: ‘I have to let more people read this’, and sent to the next round without any hesitation.

Some of such manuscripts would not make the cut too. Ao would feel vexed about such a result, but when the work won a newcomer prize in another contest, Ao would be happy from the bottom of his heart. He believed that works that should be read by everyone would definitely be published, no matter which route it took.

Even the stories Ao was very confident of would fail too.

However, the entries he sent in hesitantly had never passed the second round. In the past three years, after reading over a thousand manuscripts, that had never happened.

After doing the job of a screener more than ten times, Ao's confidence in his judgement grew. He would send works that would definitely make it into the second round without any doubt, and only submitted works that made him hesitate when there were no other choices. If there were multiple works that made him hesitate, he would follow his judgement at the moment and screened out the works accordingly.

Every works had their merit, and every work was interesting.

There were no boring works in the world.

This point had never changed.

And so, Ao continued his screening work.

But… He would be confused at times. When the contestant learned of the result, those who could enter the second round and those who failed at the first round would feel differently.

Hyonomiya-san was troubled because she never made it past the first round, which made her complex even worse. Judging from that, there should be plenty of participants who were depressed.

Ao wanted to at least write in the comment sheet: *Your work is definitely not worthless. I enjoyed reading it. Even though the results this time is regrettable, it*

doesn't invalidate future potential completely.

In actual fact, there was a contestant who failed the first ten times, and won a prize on the eleventh time.

How should I write it to convey this point to the contestants… How can I avoid hurting him… and help them a little?

The more he thought, the more he was at a loss.

The way Sakutaro saw it, if someone became discouraged and stopped writing, then their passion was only that much, and there wasn't any need to worry for someone like that.

Apart from story creation, there were many other hobbies and interest in this world which they could go into instead.

Ao felt that Sakutaro's opinion was very practical.

However, when he thought about Hiyuki with a mole beside her lips, her gaze down and her head lowered sadly, Ao's hand would unconsciously stop.

— Cyan who is beloved by everyone would never like Subaru.

I want to help Hyonomiya-san because I want her to make it past the first round and gain confidence. However…

Ao mumbled to himself, and a sweet voice sounded in the room at this moment.

“Hmmm, Saku, I am hungry, let’s go eat~”

“Ah, just a while more.”

“Let’s have Chinese food, I want to eat chilli prawns, Saku must foot the bill okay?”
<TL: エビチリ>

“Alright, it will be my treat if you behave yourself.”

“Eiko will be good, woof, master~”

Sakutaro sat before the desk surrounded by computers as he worked, while an adult lady with a cute aura and curly lashes sat right by his leg. With a hand on Sakutaro’s knee and her cheeks rubbing on Sakutaro’s waist, she barked like a puppy in a tone that could melt anyone. Ao felt dizzy when he saw this scene.

“Uncle Saku, I better read this in at home.”

Ao took as much manuscript he could carry, and prepared to leave.

“Don’t be like that, let’s eat together Ao.”

“That’s right~ Ao-chan.”

Sakutaro and the other person said unhappily. They weren’t being polite, they really didn’t mind even if Ao was in the same room, which was obvious.

But I mind──

That’s the way Sakutaro’s lover Aeka had always been.

Aeka, stage name Kanno Aeka, worked as a voice actress. Ao addressed her as Aeka-san, but Sakutaro called her ‘Wawa-chan’ or ‘Wanko’, based on her real name ‘Wako’.

Aeka might look young, but she had worked many years as a voice actress. She had been dating Sakutaro for a long time too, frequenting Sakutaro’s house when Ao was still in primary school, long before Ao started working as a screener.

Since they had been going out for such a long time, becoming more steadfast lovers would be a good idea. The two of them were getting old too, so marriage would be nice. But they would fight and split up every now and then, and get back together like glue again.

The main reason would be Sakutaro’s getting into a good pace at work, and ignoring everything around him. Aeka who liked to be cajoled couldn’t stand that, and would erupt emotionally.

— I want to break up with Saku-san!

That would happen. Even Ao knew that Aeka wanted Sakutaro to plead her to stay, but Sakutaro would give an unexpected answer:

— Yeah, okay.

He would look at the monitor and answer without missing a beat. This would enrage the already fuming Aeka who would say ‘Unbelievable! Saku-san is an idiot!’, making a bigger mess.

— I will really break off with you~ I don’t want to see you again~~

Aeka would then run off in tears. That’s how the two of them co-existed.

Even though she says she didn’t want to meet again, they would still do in their workplace.

Aeka was rather active in the normal genres, and she was rather famous for her portrayals in R18 games she took on with a different alias, a popular voice actress with numerous parts every month. When Aeka first entered the adult gaming scene, she took on the role of main heroine for a game Sakutaro created, and so the two of them became acquainted.

Before she made her name for herself in normal genres, she decided to use an alias in an adult game, and act out erotic scenes with a voice. Even though she was the one who made that call, her sense of defeat and self pity started welling up. She couldn’t perform as well as she wanted, and the voice director asked her for a retake.

— Hey Aeka, throw your unnecessary pride away and shout it out loud.

To help Aeka relax, the voice directly said in a direct tone intentionally. But this hurt the already tense Aeka.

At this moment, Sakutaro who was at the scene of the recording said casually:

— No, pride is necessary.

Aeka who was perking up her ears in the recording room heard a male voice said nonchalantly:

— Without pride, it is impossible to create good works. This is the same for acting, so I hope she can act with pride.

He then smiled warmly at Aeka.

“Don’t you agree! I will fall for him! Definitely fall for him! Head over heels! His words and smile back then had been replayed in my mind thousands of times!”

Aeka said to Ao vexingly after the fact.

— That’s too much, Saku-san is making me out to be the bad person. He is only concerned about acting cool.

The voice director acted depressed, and with the other staff fooling around a little, the atmosphere cooled down and the recording ended smoothly.

Aeka’s heroine was well received by the players, and the R18 scenes were deleted in a remake into an all age game. It then became an anime, so Aeka took on the role openly and was listed on the credit as Kanno Aeka.

The anime earned rave reviews too, and Aeka became a popular voice actress in normal genres and the adult gaming scenes. She could maintain her pride and perform, no matter which realm it was.

Using this chance, Aeka took the initiative to confess, Sakutaro accepted her and the two became lovers.

“But Sakutaro told me right then that he would say that to other rookies too. He didn’t intend to woo me, and just said that naturally. That’s why he is called the rookie killer in the industry! Isn’t that awful? Why didn’t anyone warn me before I fell for Sakutaro!?”

Ao who was a middle schooler back then felt troubled to be pressed by her.

From the perspective of a nephew, Sakutaro always had women by his

side. Sakutaro thought it was a hassle and didn’t pursue them, it was the ladies who approached him on their own.

And so, after breaking up with Aeka, other woman would appear in a time so short that it surprises Ao. Aeka would then become jealous.

“I don’t like Saku-san being with other women.”

And they would get back together…

Aeka hugged Ao in the middle of the road yesterday because Sakutaro who was in a hellish work period cancelled a date with Aeka at the last moment as usual, which drove her mad.

Ao was unfortunate enough to run into Aeka who left Sakutaro’s condo.

Maybe as a voice actress playing the role of girls full of personality that didn’t exist in the real world affected her, or maybe that’s how Aeka really was, she would ignore the eyes of others and move like an actor.

Ao had already gotten use to her. Even though she was crying as she hugged Ao yesterday and making a huge scene, she made up with Sakutaro today and was flirting with him today right before Ao.

Ao couldn’t stand it anymore.

“You two go ahead, I’m not feeling it today.”

Ao said unhappily.

“Oh, what a rare sight to see Ao-kun being so unhappy. Did you get in a fight with the super pretty girlfriend you were dating yesterday?”

Aeka said something really off.

She didn’t care about Hiyuki yesterday and kept crying while hugging onto Ao, but she was actually aware of her.

“T-That’s not a date!”

Ao had an awkward expression, and Sakutaro laughed heartily.

“Oh, that silent and cool girl? Hmm, so she is that pretty of a lady.”

“She is as pretty as a doll. White skin, long slender limbs, great figure. It’s hard to find celebrities of that calibre.”

“Oh, so that’s the girl Ao is wooing. And so? Feeling down because things aren’t going smooth with her?”

Sakutaro seemed to have notice that Ao was troubled when he was reading the manuscript. Ao couldn’t underestimate his uncle in such a situation.

“I already said that’s not it. Hyonomiya-san is writing a light novel, and I am giving her advice. We went to the aquarium yesterday to look for reference material. Anyway… Hyonomiya-san already told me that she doesn’t want me to talk to her in school…”

He blurted it out unintentionally.

Sakutaro and Aeka opened their eyes wide.

“Ao-kun, she told you something that nasty?”

“Just what did you do, Ao?”

Since he already said that much, Ao figured he might as well discuss it with them, and continued:

“She doesn’t want me to talk to her… Did I do anything that made her say that… I don’t know. We had a fun time in the aquarium, the atmosphere was peaceful on the trip back as we chatted. Nothing strange happened after exiting the station…”

Under the faint glow of the setting sun, Hiyuki seemed exceptionally bright, her cheeks red as she said shyly that she hoped Kazetani-kun will like it, so she would write a fantastic story with foreshadowing. Aside from that—

“However, when I greeted her in school this morning, her reaction was cold… After school, we went to the cafe we frequent to discuss her manuscript. She suddenly showed a sad face, saying the heroine would never like the main character before heading off.”

When he thought back about Hiyuki saying ‘we are not compatible’, Ao felt a stab of pain in his chest and turn quiet.

“Hey, Ao, could it be…”

“That should be it.”

After hearing Ao out, the two adults showed a complicated expression.

Sakutaro was a bit surprised, while Aeka looked apologetic.

They seemed to have figured out why Hiyuki was unhappy—

“So why is Hyonomiya-san treating me so coldly all of a sudden?”

Ao asked seriously, and Aeka answered with gentle eyes that protected the boy warmly:

“Because she is jealous, Ao-kun.”

“What’s the matter Hiyuki, you are not moving your chopsticks.”

Hiyuki who was sitting on the tatami opposite her grandmother for dinner rounded her shoulders when she heard her grandmother chiding her.

Holding a bowl with her bony hand, her grandmother looked at Hiyuki with sharp eyes.

“Still feeling unwell?”

Her tone seemed to be accusing Hiyuki, making her slumped back. It had been like this all this while, when Hiyuki caught a cold, her grandmother would say: ‘It’s your fault for neglecting your health and catching a cold. Take care of it yourself.’ She didn’t act like other mothers who would prepare hot water or ice packs for their child.

Hiyuki could follow her grandmother’s instructions and take flu medicine from the medicine box, cut apple to eat by herself, and rest alone in the wide and quiet room.

If she showed signs of discomfort or low spiritedness before her grandmother, she would be lecture for being too frail and not taking care of herself.

That day when they visited the aquarium, Hiyuki returned home slightly later than her curfew. So she made an excuse that she felt unwell and rested a little before returning home. Her grandmother said her health was bad because Hiyuki made her body did something uncomfortable. Her grandmother asked her persistently back then.

She would have to go through the same thing if she said she felt unwell again.

“I beg your pardon, I am just thinking about something.”

Hiyuki answered with her head bowed. Her grandmother said in a stern voice:

“It is rude to think about things during meals, you will make the one eating with you unhappy, so don’t do that.”

“… I am sorry.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“… Mathematics is hard.”

Her grandmother looked straight at Hiyuki again.

Hiyuki felt a chill on her back as if she had been seen through.

Her grandmother then said in a stern voice:

“If you study properly in school, you can get good grades even if you don’t go for extra tuition. You feel your school work is hard because you are not working hard enough.”

“… I apologize, I will work hard and not take it easy.”

As she bore the gaze of her grandmother, she managed to finish the plain tasting dinner. After keeping the utensils, she could finally be by herself in her room.

But she would think about Ao this way.

Kazetani-kun already said ‘good morning’ to me… I always hoped my classmates would greet me naturally…

— It’s fine even if you don’t greet me in the morning…

She said that to Ao.

No matter how kind and gentle Kazetani-kun is, that must be a surprise.

When Ao asked her to list the reason why the heroine like the main character, she couldn’t think of any and her heart was filled with despair.

It was natural for Subaru to like Cyan.

Cyan was as gentle as Ao, a girl as broad as the blue sky, someone anyone would like.

But just like it was impossible for Cyan to like Subaru, Ao liking Hiyuki was impossible.

Ao said he wasn’t popular, but that wasn’t true. Plenty of girls like Ao, including that woman ——

She wasn’t his uncle’s co worker, but actual a lover that’s older than Ao.

She felt ebbing pain deep within her chest, someone annoying like her wasn’t suitable for the popular Ao. Hiyuki fell into deeper despair, thinking that it was unbearable for Ao to waste time on someone like her.

Kazetani-kun’s girlfriend… I hate it when Kazetani-kun meets with other girls alone after school...

The next morning, Hiyuki still didn’t make any progress on her manuscript.

She felt that the world full of things she like and had slowly built up with Ao had lost its luster.

It’s such trivial everyday scenes, a boring story that keep dragging on… I don’t want Kazetani-kun to see this.

Hiyuki turned off the power and left the computer lab.

She entered the classroom right before self study was about to begin. Ao who was talking with the classmates around him lift his head and looked at Hiyuki. Hiyuki averted her eyes in a hurry and sat down at her seat, then peeked at Ao. Ao just happened to be looking at Hiyuki again —— his expression was weird as if he had something stuck in his throat.

Kazetani-kun seemed to be very bothered by what I said yesterday...

Hiyuki felt apologetic as the ache in her chest throbs, and the two of them locked eyes.

That moment, Ao’s face turned red.

This was the first time Hiyuki saw Ao turning red like that, and Ao turned his face away quickly.

Kazetani-kun… Is he angry about what happened yesterday…?

She was the one who said those mean words to Ao and avoided him, but when she saw Ao averting his face so bluntly, Hiyuki still felt her chest hurt, and had the urge to cry.

After that, Ao would peek at Hiyuki from time to time. When he met Hiyuki in the eyes, he will turn his head, and the process would repeat again.

Whenever this happens, Hiyuki would hold her Kitefin shark mechanical pencils tightly, shutting her lips tight to endure the throbbing pain in her chest.

After school was out, Hiyuki left the classroom first, and sent a message to Ao from outside the building.

‘Sorry, manuscript not progressing, let’s take a break today.’

After sending the message, Hiyuki felt sadness fill her chest.

Maybe writing the manuscript together with me is a burden on Kazetani-kun. His girlfriend might have said something, but Kazetani-kun is too embarrassed to tell me he can’t meet me after school anymore. That’s probably why he keeps looking at me as if he had something to say...

The more she thought about it, the more it made sense to her. Even the weather was turning gloomy as Hiyuki walked out the school gate with her head low.

“Ah, wonderful, I found you.”

She suddenly heard a cute voice.

“You are really prominent, I saw from a distance away. The air about you is very different from the other students. Ah, sorry for finding you so suddenly, I am the friend of Kazetani-kun who is in your school year. I am Kanno Aeka, can I borrow some of your time?”

The cute woman older than her who hugged Ao tightly at the station was standing before Hiyuki smiling.

She was dressed really cutely today, wearing a fashionable mini skirt and sleeveless blouse which suited her. After hearing it once again, Hiyuki found her voice really sweet and charming.

“I am a voice actress, do you know what that is?”

Voice actress! Kazetani-kun is dating a voice actress?

“Sorry… I don’t watch television.”

“Ahh, it’s fine, voice actress aren’t that famous. Oh right, I’m here to clear some misunderstanding.”

Hiyuki’s heart pounded hard.

Kazetani-kun only accompanied you to write manuscripts after school and visit the aquarium because he is kind to everyone. Please don’t misunderstand and think you are

special, I am Kazetani's girlfriend. That's what she wants to make clear...

No matter how Hiyuki thought about it, that's the reason Ao's girlfriend came to see her.

"It's about Ao-kun…"

As I suspected.

Hiyuki's chest tightened for a moment.

"I am not ―"

Misunderstanding. When Hiyuki was about to say that.

"The one I am dating is Ao-kun's uncle, Ao-kun is just like my little brother."

"… Huh?"

"I fought with Ao's uncle frequently, and I am always the one who cries; Ao-kun is really gentle and consoles me, so I would unconsciously make him baby me. I am older than him, so this must look strange. I am reflecting on this, but Ao-kun doesn't look like Saku-san, but is similar in some ways. When Ao-kun treats me kindly, it is like Saku-san treating me kindly, which soothe my heart."

Aeka's sweet voice sounded provocating, and Hiyuki who was already wavering fell into deeper chaos.

What is this person saying? Kazetani-kun consoling her…? Because Kazetani-kun is like his uncle…? Kazetani-kun treating her well soothes her heart, so she kept asking him to baby her...

Images of Aeka pressing onto Ao as she hugged him in tears flashes in Hiyuki's mind, and her heart kept pounding.

This person is the lover of Kazetani-kun's uncle, but is having an affair with Kazetani-kun...

Her brain was heating up.

"I... I have to go."

"Ah, wait, I'm not done yet."

"I have nothing to say to you."

Anyway, she didn't want to hear her sweet voice anymore. Just thinking about Ao being NTRed made her chest hurts. As Hiyuki walked past Aeka with a tensed face—

"Ah, Ao-kun."

She heard Aeka said that.

Next was Ao's voice.

"Hmm? Aeka-san, what are you doing at our school?"

“I have something to say to Hyonomiya-san, but I think I am being detested.”

“Hmmm? Ah, Hyonomiya-san?”

Ao called out to Hiyuki from afar.

Hiyuki hastened her pace.

But Ao was riding a bicycle, and caught up in no time.

Fog like rain started drizzling from the grey sky. Ao rode his bike alongside Hiyuki as they passed through the rows of cherry blossom trees. He said to Hiyuki:

“Hyonomiya-san, I am sorry, I didn’t thought Aeka-san would look for you. What did she tell you?”

Ao looked ragged and his face flushed, probably because he gave chased with all his might and didn’t catch his breath yet.

“… She said that she is the lover of Kazetani-kun’s uncle, and Kazetani-kun is like her little brother…”

Hiyuki didn’t stop and her face remained tense as she answered in a cold low tone. Ao said in a hagged voice again:

“That, that’s right! Aeka is my uncle’s lover… What else did she say?”

“Kazetani-kun is this really okay?”

“Huh?”

Hiyuki turned back and said in a rather strong tone, which made Ao open his eyes wide.

Falling in love with your uncle’s lover, Kazetani-kun is so pitiable.

Raging emotions boiled in her head and her chest hurt so much as if it was being torn apart.

“I don’t like this, Kazetani-kun being cuckolded…”

Tears were welling in her eyes, but Ao would be troubled if she cried here; Hiyuki averted her face and ran away from Ao as fast as she could.

From behind her.

“Hyonomiya-san”

Came Ao’s shout, but she didn’t turn back.

“It’s all Aeka’s fault, things are even more troublesome.”

That night.

In Sakutaro’s place, Ao who was massaging his temple said in a bitter voice.

“Hyonomiya-san is too delusional, just how did she interpret into me two timing between Ao-kun and Saku-san? Is her imagination too wonderful, or is she too stubborn.”

The culprit Aeka didn’t reflect at all, and got straight to the point.

Sakutaro had a bemused look as well.

“How I wish I could experience this type of love comedy in high school.”

Ao felt like telling Aeka that Sakutaro had no interest in high schoolers and he only dated college girls and working adults.

But doing that would only increase his problems.

Ao sighed.

“Hyonomiya-san is a serious person, and easily swayed by others. She will believe others easily, and is suspicious of things.”

“What a troublesome girl.”

The troublesome woman Aeka said. Ao felt weak, and Sakutaro told him:

“Since you understand her so well, then as the main character of a

love comedy, you have to make a manly move now. Between ‘going’ and ‘waiting’, you have to choose ‘going’. By the way, if you choose wait, it would result in a force bad end.”

“Don’t compare my life with your video games.”

“Oh really? But life is like a video game, and it is one without a reset button. If you don’t take any actions, she will continue to misunderstand and drift away from you.

“Ugh…”

Ao wanted to refute, but couldn’t find anything to say.

I don’t want Hyonomiya-san to misunderstand that I like Aeka.

The next morning, Ao waited for Hiyuki in front of the computer lab, but Hiyuki didn’t turn up.

Just before self study was starting, Ao returned to the classroom to find Hiyuki at her seat with an icy face.

Aeka said that Hiyuki was jealous two days earlier, so Ao was very concerned about it yesterday and kept peeking at Hiyuki. When their gaze met, he would blush, and then repeat this foolish cycle. His classmates kept telling him: “Ao is looking at Hyonomiya again.” “It’s impossible to woo Hyonomiya, just give up.” “I will introduce a girl to you, she’s not as pretty as Hyonomiya, but she is cheerful and will get along well with Ao. She looks cute too.”

However, Ao was determined today, and stared right at Hiyuki.

Before today, he had never felt such strong emotions for a girl ever.

When he was in the second year of middle school, he had a crush on the girl in his neighbouring class. That cheery girl with bright eyes frequently dropped by Ao’s class to play.

Ao felt her hearty laughter was wonderful and heard it a lot. That girl would talk with her friends and stopped in the middle, then turn Ao’s way with a sweet look, making his heart skip a beat.

The two of them happened to be in the environmental beautification committee, and when they cleaned the meeting rooms together, he started talking to the girl closely. That girl took the initiative to converse with Ao, which filled him with expectations.

Ao thought that he liked that girl.

But the one she liked was Ao’s friend.

She dropped by Ao’s classroom frequently in order to see his friend. Her sweet gaze thrown in Ao’s direction was directed towards Ao’s friend who was beside him.

She only befriended Ao because she wanted to ask Ao to help hook her up.

— Kazetani-kun, you will help me right?

When the hopeful eyes were looking at him, all the foreshadowing Ao didn’t notice came to light all at once. This was a heavy blow to Ao, and he couldn’t answer immediately.

— Alright.

And so, with Ao pulling the strings, she won the heart of Ao’s friend. The two of them became lovers right before summer vacation begins.

With his friend busy dating her, the first half of summer was really boring for Ao.

That was why he completed his homework early.

Ao could have rejected her back then and told her how he felt. However, he didn’t make that choice.

I like you, and can’t support your love with someone else. Ao couldn’t say these words.

Not because he was concerned about his friend, or he wish for her happiness.

These were all excuses. Ao just thought that his feelings wasn’t stronger than hers. Ao had never hated anyone.

He could talk to anyone easily and befriend them.

However, doesn’t that mean he didn’t especially like anyone? That unease creeped into his mind. Even if he fell for someone, would he

step aside like he did in his second year of middle school if the other party harboured stronger emotions?

‘It has to be this person’, in Ao’s life, had he ever experienced such intense emotions?

— Kazetani-kun… there isn’t anyone you hate right?

— No matter how childish or boring a story is, Kazetani-kun can enjoy it…

When Hiyuki asked him that, Ao’s heart skipped a beat, and he felt uncomfortable.

— Is it interesting, Ao?

— Yes! Every one of it is interesting!

When he saw Ao engrossed in the manuscripts, Sakutaro said in a bitter voice and expression:

— Is that so… All of them are interesting?

Ao felt the same way when Sakutaro said that.

No one he hated, all the works were interesting to him. On the flip side, there weren’t anything he felt was special, or was attached to.

He felt ashamed about the way he was, that’s why he was attracted to the passion imbued in the manuscripts kept in these boxes.

However, at this moment, Ao developed intense feeling for Hiyuki that he was not willing to back away from.

After waiting impatiently for the first period to end, Ao stood up and walked towards Hiyuki.

When they saw what Ao was doing, all his classmates were shocked and looked at them.

Hiyuki also sat in her chair, looking up at Ao with a baffled expression.

Ao never thought that he would be so close to Hiyuki in the classroom. And his face right now must looked so serious and stern.

What the hell is he doing? Their classmates gulped as Ao grabbed Hiyuki's hand.

"I have something to say. Hyonomiya-san, please come with me."

Hiyuki opened her lips that had an endearing mole besides it. She probably wanted to say something, but she couldn't utter a word as her lips trembled.

Pulling her arms that were so slender it might break at any moment, Ao hurried along the corridor during the period break. The students they passed by and poking their heads out of the classroom all had a surprised face as they stared at the two of them.

Ao went up the stairs and headed for the roof.

The door to the roof was locked, so Ao stopped before it, placed his arms on either side of Hiyuki to block her retreat path.

Hiyuki slumped her shoulders.

The baffled look in her eyes had turned into confusion.

“Hyonomiya-san.”

Ao said in a serious voice:

“Aeka is my uncle’s lover, I am not in love with Aeka, won’t fall for her, and would not be cuckold by her!”

Hiyuki still couldn’t say a word. Even if she wanted to escape like last time, with Ao blocking her in and leaning so close, she couldn’t move.

If it was the usual Ao, he would definitely back off in a panic when the other party show such a fearful expression. But today —— he yelled at Hiyuki who was trapped by him and looking up at him fearfully.

“I don’t want Hyonomiya-san to misunderstand any more!”

Her long lashes and cute lips with a mole besides it trembled slightly

“Also, be it the classroom or anywhere else, I will greet Hyonomiya-san if I want to, and talk to you if I want to! If you can’t write your novel, then discuss it with me!

Hiyuki’s voice finally reached Ao’s ears.

She looked up at Ao, and squeezed out these words… using all the

strength she has…

“… Yes.”

It still sounded a bit confused ── a well meaning voice cooled Ao’s head down. In place of that, his face heated up.

What am I doing!?

Bringing Hyonomiya-san to such a place, doing such a thing──

His hands that restricted Hiyuki’s movement were pulled back hastily. With his face burning, Ao averted his gaze and said uneasily:

“L-Let’s go back to the classroom.”

Hiyuki didn’t speak this time, opening her mouth a little happily and nodded.

Ao and Hiyuki returned to class with their face flushed. Their classmates’ gaze fell on them, and they opened their eyes even wider from the surprise.

Leaving Ao whose eyes were wavering awkwardly aside, even the ‘Ice Maiden’ Hyonomiya Hiyuki’s pale cheek was red. The way her eyelashes were lowered felt really bashful.

And the mole besides her mouth was really charming. In place of her usual icy aura, she was basking in a sweet and happy atmosphere!

Hiyuki was like this the entire day. Students who heard the news from other classes came to look at Hiyuki who was smiling happily were all shocked.

What happened? Hey you, what did you do? Why is Hyonomiya all smiles? Ao was attacked from all fronts, and was barely hanging on.

“That’s how Hyonomiya-san actually is. She was just nervous in the past, and couldn’t express her feelings well.”

Ao answered.

“What the hell, you are making it sound so easy!”

“Boyfriend? Are you her boyfriend!?”

“Damn it! I thought you would definitely be dumped! We even planned a karaoke session to cheer you up from your failed love. And now, we look stupid for doing that.”

“… Next time, want to go out with together with our partners?”

“You are already planning a double date!?”

Some swore, some sighed, and some envied.

Well meaning voices also came from the girls’ side.

“Hyonomiya-san looks really cute when she smile.”

“Her entire person feels much gentler now.”

When school was finished for the day, Ao went before Hiyuki’s seat.

“Hyonomiya-san, let’s go to the cafe together.”

“… Yes.”

Hiyuki nodded bashfully.

The girls greeted her.

“Bye, Hyonomiya-san.”

When she heard the female student’s greeting, Hiyuki was shocked beyond words. Ao said to her softly:

“Hyonomiya-san, give it a try.”

“G-Good bye…”

Hiyuki opened her lips with a mole besides it in a smile, and bid her classmates farewell. Her careful smile made the hearts of both boys and girls race, and so everyone greeted her:

“Bye bye.”

“See you tomorrow, Hyonomiya-san.”

“By the way, bye Kazetani-kun.”

Hiyuki said good bye to everyone happily.

“Ehh… Sorry about scaring you today.”

At the round table in their usual cafe, Hiyuki ordered mint tea and Ao ordered chrysanthemum Hiyuki usually orders. After his emotions cooled down, his face started heating up, and Ao apologized with his face lowered.

Hiyuki probably remembered what Ao did and the reaction of the classmates, her entire face turned red.

“Not at all… I am really happy.”

She muttered.

Her expression was too cute and flustered Ao, who then said to her with a smile:

“Hyonomiya-san, you told me before that you didn’t know why Cyan likes Subaru.”

Hiyuki’s eyes turned gloomy.

“W-Well…”

“I know why!”

Ao looked straight at Hiyuki and said confidently.

Hiyuki’s eyes wavered.

“Subaru was all alone in his own world and ostracized by others, but he never bore a grudge for anyone right? That’s because he has a pure and strong spirit. Even after coming to a different world, facing problems he was not used to and meeting with many failures, he still worked tirelessly. He even became partners with Heinrich who couldn’t form a mental link with anyone right? Subaru worked hard even though nobody knew, and didn’t give up even though there are no incentives to keep going. I think his careful and gentle personality is great, even though one couldn’t tell what he is thinking from the outside, but he must have considered many things. With the contrast between his appearance and character, isn’t it intriguing and urged others to want to get to know him?”

Hiyuki kept her cute lips with a mole beside it shut as she listened to Ao. Her transparent eyes had the look of surprise, with tears welling up slowly.

Ao smiled shyly.

“And only Cyan knew that Subaru came from another world, works hard and other things about him. Only she knew how he really is, and sharing this secret is a thrilling experience and feels really special right?”

“Yes… Yes.”

Hiyuki snivelled and muttered:

“That’s right… your heart would beat fast and you will feel really happy.”

She sounded a little timid, as if she was trying to confirm how Cyan felt.

“Isn’t that right? So it isn’t strange for Cyan to like Subaru.”

Ao asked with his eyes: “Right?” Hiyuki answered with a joyous gaze.

“That’s right… Not strange at all.”

“Next, we just need to convey this to the readers, let’s think about it together.”

Hiyuki wiped away her tears with her pale finger and smile.

“… Yes, I will work hard.”

Sakutaro and Aeka sat at the blind spot of Ao and Hiyuki, watching the pure and innocent interaction between the two.

“What a sweet and sour youth~”

“Yeah, a love comedy drama.”

After spotting Ao and Hiyuki at the school gate, they followed them all the way here.

Saying things like things seemed to be progressing smoothly, Ao's girlfriend is a real beauty, laying hands on a high schooler is too lewd, the two of them converse quietly. In contrast, Ao and Hiyuki would bow their head shyly every now and then, blushed and smile as they continued chatting.

"This is it, Hyonomiya-san."

"Hmm?"

"You might not believe it earlier, but there can be dramatic climax in a seemingly plain everyday life. Passing by each other might not seem like a big deal to a bystander, but it might be an important event for the subject themselves. Thinking back on it, you will feel that ahh, I did something really incredible…"

"Yes… Yes."

The two of them blushed again. Hiyuki opened her lips that had a mole beside it and mumbled:

"Even in everyday life, there are many… things that would make your heart race."

Chapter 5: The Person Who Treated Me Gently That Day

Thanks to Kazetani-kun... I said goodbye to my classmates, this is like a dream...

There are already seven cafe stamps, another three more to get the cake, keep it up. Yosh. After chatting with Ao and bidding him farewell, Hiyuki's footsteps were light, as if she was walking in the clouds.

She kept thinking about Ao's serious expression as he said that he didn't want Hyonomiya-san to misunderstand. Whenever she thought of that scene, her chest would throb strongly and she would feel really blessed.

Kazetani-kun was different from back then, he might be scary... but it really moved me and made me glad.

When Ao said in a bright expression and voice that it wasn't strange for Cyan to like Subaru, her heart was deeply moved, and she thought things would really be as Ao said.

Ever since Kazetani-kun started talking to me, I encountered many wonderful and unbelievable things. Kazetani-kun is just like a magician. I think that if Kazetani-kun is by my side, even I could change.

Or rather, she was already changing.

There was still some time before evening. The streets were covered in gentle mist, the familiar dry cleaning shop, walls of the residence, the roofs, the cute yellow and orange flowers potted at the entrance, even the warm fragrance of dinner being cooked in the houses felt so gentle and soothing.

When Subaru and Cyan watched the sun set into the sea, and when they had their first kiss, the entire world probably looked like this.

Hiyuki remembered that Ao said the scene reflected in the character's eyes would change according to their state of mind.

It's really true, Kazetani-kun.

Hiyuki muttered in her mind as she passed through the extravagant gate of her house with a heart full of bliss, walked along the stone paved path to the entrance and pulled the sliding door open—

"!"

Goosebumps appeared on her skin out of fear, and she froze in place just like that.

At the entrance was an elderly woman with a pale face carved with wrinkles. Her back was straight, brows were frowning, eyes were sharp and her lips tightly sealed, sitting properly there like a demon.
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seiza>

The gentle scene was shattered instantly, and complete darkness loomed over Hiyuki’s head.

The world turned into an abyss unreachable by light, and its master, a powerful and terrifying creature was glaring at the startled Hiyuki.

Her grandmother stood up with a start, her bony hand reaching out to Hiyuki and grabbed Hiyuki who still had her shoes on.

“Come here!”

It felt different from Ao grabbing her hand. Fear and sense of danger stemming from her basic instincts hit Hiyuki. Pulled by a force that seemed much greater than what a seventy year old woman could muster, Hiyuki trembled from the pain and fear.

Taking her shoes off in an unnatural stance, Hiyuki had no time to place her shoes properly as her grandmother dragged her through the corridor and into Hiyuki’s room.

Why is grandmother so mad? I came back before curfew, did the chores and tidied the courtyard before heading to school...

What entered her eyes the next moment threw Hiyuki down the valley of despair.

Spew all over the tatami were books with bright colourful covers. The illustrations were girls with revealing costume and large breasts, young girls in primary school with cat ears, and girls wearing armour that looked like underwear posing sexually. The coloured spread pages even had nude girls washing the back of a male main character in the bathroom, all these were laid out here.

Hiyuki felt her blood freezing over.

Her grandmother detested manga and anime. She even ordered Hiyuki to throw away the notebook with an anime character that she got at a sports meet. There was no way she would allow Hiyuki to read light novels.

She knew that her grandmother would throw a fit if she saw the covers of these books, so Hiyuki carefully stowed the collection of light novels she bought into the deepest part of her drawers.

There was no way of knowing when her grandmother would enter her room, so she would never read light novels at home. It wasn’t just light novels that were spewed on the floor. Even the manuscripts Hiyuki wrote were thrown into the heap.

My light novel——

She felt as if someone was crushing her chest. Her grandmother was trembling from rage, and said in a sharp tone:

“What is the meaning of this? Hiyuki!”

Hiyuki slumped her body and lowered her head. Her grandmother jerked her hand hard, as if to say: “Look at me when you talk!”

“Ughhh.”

A moan escaped from Hiyuki’s lips.

“You are reading these lowly, shameless and poisonous things behind my back?”

Her grandmother shook Hiyuki’s hand hard, and interrogated Hiyuki while staring at her face with angry eyes.

“And what is this? You wrote this? Hiyuki?”

She then dragged her to the stack of manuscript paper and yelled.

Hiyuki stumble forward and fell beside the pile of manuscript. Her grandmother looked down at her as if she was staring at a criminal with her body trembling.

“Is such lowly, childish and unpleasant scribbles written by my granddaughter? How frightening.”

Her grandmother’s words pierced Hiyuki’s ears. Her dismissive voice

overlapped with the cruel criticism on the comment sheet.

‘The story is messy, use cheap words, vulgar’, ‘the main character feel unpleasant, a pain for the reader to sit through’, ‘the content is presumptuous and childish’.

The comments floating in Hiyuki’s brain tormented her.

Stop it, don’t say it anymore.

Hiyuki wanted to stuff her ears.

My novel is childish, unpleasant and presumptuous, so it never made it through the selection and everyone at school avoided me...

When she felt that she was about to be dragged into dark waters.

— Good bye, Hyonomiya-san.

She suddenly heard a cheerful voice.

Right, I... greeted everyone in school today.

— G-Good bye...

Hiyuki’s cheeks blushed from happiness, and she replied with a smile

on her lips; Ao watch over her from the side with his bright, gentle eyes.

— Hyonomiya-san’s novel is interesting

“Get rid of all the filthy things here right now!”

“… No.”

Hiyuki collapsed onto the floor with her head down, and said softly in this position.

“What? I can’t hear you!”

Her grandmother’s stern voice sounded out.

This time, Hiyuki answered with a slightly stronger tone:

“These are not lowly, shameless and poisonous things. They are not cheap or childish.”

— The good thing about light novels is that anything goes, and the writing style is very liberal, right?

Its fine even if it was just one person, Hiyuki just needed someone to listen and accept her words.

Just someone to tell her that her writing was good.

Someone to read the clumsy story written by her. Someone like Ao who would push her forward cheerfully.

— Just do whatever you want, write whatever you wish!

Hiyuki lifted her head up and shouted.

“My novel won’t make anyone unpleasant!”

“Ao-kun, congratulations!”

“Ao has finally become a man.”

“Wah, what!?”

The moment he stepped into Sakutarou’s place, Ao heard the sound of poppers as confetti got showered over his head.

After parting with Hiyuki at the cafe.

Ao returned home, and brought food to Sakutarou’s condo on his mother’s behest.

“Aeka-san, you can’t pull that thing while pointing it at others! Uncle

Saku too, why are you grinning so widely!?”

“Ara, I just felt a bit hot.”

“Yes, you actually said ‘sharing this secret is a thrilling experience and feels really special, so it isn’t strange for me to fall for you.’ Ao-kun, you are really cool!”

Aeka said in a voice of a boy. As expected of a professional voice actress, even though her voice was sweet and cute, her performance sounded like a cheerful boy in his teens.

No, that’s not the problem.

“Why... Why do you know that!?”

“Ara, why indeed?”

Aeka laughed eloquently.

Ao was anxious.

“That’s the line of the character in the story. And what I said was that it isn’t strange for Cyan to fall for Subaru.”

“Ao, you said such sweet words to a girl so smoothly by using the work as an excuse, good job. I will use this trick in my next game.”

“Yup, Onee-san was really moved when I heard that too.”

“You heard? Where did you hear that!?”

Were the two of them there too? When? Where were they?

Ao’s face was heating up.

“Uncle Saku and Aeka too, you two are invading a person’s privacy!”

“Ara, don’t be so angry. Wawa and I both felt responsible for the spat between you and your girlfriend, that’s why we were worried.”

“That’s right, definitely not because Saku can’t think of a plot, and thought he could use the two of you as reference, that’s definitely not it.”

“Aeka-san, you let the cat slip!”

Ao retorted on reflex.

These two adults were really...

Embarrassment and anger made Ao’s fist tremble. Sakutarou offered him tickets at this juncture.

“These are tickets for a movie premiering this weekend, go with her. This is a fantasy theme show that is popular with girls, and would be suitable for dates.”

“Ao-kun phone her quick.”

“Huhh!?”

“That’s right, phone her right now, you have to.”

“Uncle Saku, is your script stuck so badly!?”

The terrible adults cheered him in high spirits ‘Phone her!’ ‘Phone her!’ ‘Call her now!’ ‘strike while the iron is hot’.

How could he ask Hiyuki to a movie in front of these two?

But like Sakutarou said, Hiyuki might like this movie. If he asked her, she would probably be very happy. Ao imagined her lips with a mole beside smiling gently.

Yes, for Hyonomiya-san’s sake.

Ao browsed his phone for Hiyuki’s number, and pressed the call button.

This is my first time calling Hyonomiya-san. What would Hyonomiya-san be doing at this time? Did she have dinner yet... or maybe not...?

Sakutarou and Aeka also leaned closer.

“Amazing, Ao-kun! Go ── Go ──!”

“I will count on you for the super embarrassing line that would make the heart of the players itch.”

“Keep it down! Really!”

As Ao was complaining, the call got through.

“Ah, H-Hyonomiya-san? Sorry for calling you so suddenly.”

Ao shooed Sakutarou and Aeka with his hand, and decided to get straight to the point.

Snivelling sound came from the other end of the phone.

Hmm?

“……”

This was the sound of crying and her voice breaking from tears.

Hyonomiya-san is crying...?

“What happened!? Hyonomiya-san, what is the matter?”

Ao suddenly shouted with a serious expression, which made Sakutarou and Aeka open their eyes wide.

Hiyuki seemed unable to articulate herself properly, sounds of snivelling and vehicle driving by could be heard from her side of the line.

“Hyonomiya-san, where are you right now?”

Ao shouted desperately, and there was finally a response.

“… Kazetani-kun.”

He could hear a weak voice brushed across his ear.

“I, I… Grandmother…. Home…”

The sound of cars mixed in with the rain.

Looking out the window, Ao saw it was starting to rain.

“Hyonomiya-san, tell me your location! I will pick you up!”

After telling Hiyuki to seek shelter somewhere, Ao left Sakutarou’s condo and headed for her. The rain became heavier and the air was freezing.

Ao wore sports shoes and splashed water everywhere as he ran, headed for the convenience store near their school where Hiyuki was waiting.

He told her to wait inside, but Hiyuki was standing at the entrance of the store with her head down, her school bag on her shoulder and a large tote bag clutched before her chest. She was wearing her uniform and her blouse was completely wet and sticking to her skin, she looked really cold.

“Hyonomiya-san!”

Ao called out to her and Hiyuki lift her head, her eyes red and welling with tears.

“K-Kazetani-kun, I… ran away from home, I, can’t go back anymore…”

Ao brought the sobbing Hiyuki back to Sakutarou’s condo, and let her changed into clothes that Aeka prepared. She didn’t have dinner yet, so Ao took out the food he delivered to Sakutarou, which include stewed yam and tofu steak.

“Anyway, eat something to calm yourself down.”

Hiyuki was wearing a pink sleeveless blouse with black dots, and tights with pink and white stripes, which made Ao wonder if there were any normal clothes here. But these were comfortable clothes Aeka wore if she stayed the night at Sakutarou’s place, so it couldn’t be helped. This was much better than wearing Sakutarou’s clothes.

He was thankful that they provided a refuge for Hiyuki.

If Ao and Hiyuki who were high schoolers stayed out too late, they would be sent for counseling by teachers on patrol. If Ao brought Hiyuki home, his mother would probably interrogate him about this. He had younger twin siblings at home to, so it would be hard for Hiyuki to calm down.

Hiyuki lowered her head, cut the tofu with her disposable chopsticks

and sent it to her mouth.

“… Delicious, it’s tasty.”

She muttered softly, and ate the smooth yam next.

“Delicious.”

She said again.

“I have rather young siblings at home, so the seasoning would be sweeter. Kids would probably love this. It’s great that Hyonomiya-san likes it. Ah, Hyonomiya-san!”

Hiyuki covered her face with one hand and started sobbing, which made Ao panic.

“Ao-kun, at a time like this, you have to hold her close and comfort her.”

“It’s fine to kiss her too, Ao.”

While the adults were being sarcastic, it wasn’t the time to do that.

Ao pulled some tissues from a box and offered it to Hiyuki, who rubbed her nose and said:

“I-I’m sorry. But this is really... delicious... so tofu steak could be so delicious... t-the stewed yam too, just what kind of stewed food had I been eating in the past...?”

“If you like it, eat more.”

“Y-Yes.”

Hiyuki cried as she ate, muttering delicious, delicious as she ate the tofu steak and stewed yam. When she finally stopped sobbing, Ao asked what happened to her, she sat on the floor and pulled her knees to her face.

“... Grandmother discovered the light novels and manuscripts I hid.”

Hiyuki told him everything in a hoarse voice.

Isn’t Hyonomiya-san’s grandmother a very strict person?

She banned children from reading manga and anime, so Hiyuki had to write her light novels at school.

Hiyuki’s curfew was very strict, Ao knew that Hiyuki was very afraid of her grandmother. Hiyuki once muttered sadly: ‘Grandmother hates me...’

“I-It’s probably because I am acting... strange recently, so my grandmother went to search my room. Grandmother would do something like that... I already knew that, if I had only hidden it better...”

Hiyuki gripped the hands on her knee tightly as her shoulders trembled.

“Grandmother said that light novels are lowly, corrupting and unpleasant things, and wants me to throw them all away... I have always been afraid of my grandmother and wouldn’t dare go against her... But I couldn’t back down regarding this point, and I talked back to her for the first time.”

For the docile Hiyuki, this was a big matter.

Hiyuki told her grandmother that to her, reading and writing light novels were important things, and she couldn’t abandon them.

— If you want to throw the light novels away, I will leave this house with them!

Hiyuki kept the light novels and manuscripts into a tote bag on the spot and dashed out of the house, leaving behind her grandmother who was shouting ‘wait!’

She must have been enduring it all this while, that’s why she exploded like this. Hiyuki continued talking about her feelings as she sobbed.

“I, I... absolutely don’t want to go back to that home. I want to work, and rent a place to live in. Grandmother should... probably think that is better. Because grandmother hates me, she thinks that my mother leaving me with her after she died is a nuisance.”

“Wait a minute, is that what your grandmother said?”

Aeka leaned over, as if she couldn’t let this matter rest. Hiyuki nodded

with tears on her cheeks.

“Before mother was hospitalized —— When my parents divorce and we just headed back to grandmother’s place to stay, I heard... Grandmother talking to my mother. ‘What, what about me? That’s why I objected so much, the person herself might not mind, but the one who have to shoulder the burden will be troubled. It is really too cold, so cold it makes one shivers...’ I-I was young back then, so I didn’t really understand. But when grandmother was scolding my mother, my mother said in tears ‘When I got married, I didn’t know I would be getting a divorce.’”

—— That’s why I objected it so much!

—— The one who have to shoulder the burden will be troubled!

Her grandmother’s voice was stern, and her expression tensed like a demon.

—— It is really too cold.

Hiyuki’s mother was hospitalized not long after coming back, and passed away.

Hiyuki’s grandmother believed that her daughter had a weak constitution. When Hiyuki’s father had a mistress, it increased the psychological burden on her daughter, so she hated Hiyuki’s father, and Hiyuki who took after her father, Hiyuki explained.

“I... Don’t look like my mother... My mother was gentle and kind...

After my mother got married and left the house, grandmother still loved my mother deeply and cherished her... In the past, an acquaintance of grandmother said... your granddaughter don’t take after your daughter, and resembles her father... Grandmother had a disgusted expression... She used an unhappy and scary voice and asked me to go somewhere else...”

Hiyuki showed the photo of her mother she brought along when she ran away from home, and showed it to everyone.

“There... isn’t much left. The photos I took with my father had all been thrown away by grandmother...”

The few photographs she had were all taken after she moved in with her grandmother. The young woman smiling on the hospital bed had a petite and cute face.

If her face wasn’t that pale, she would look cuter and happier. Even though she was smiling, it had a hint of sadness about her. On the trees outside the window were pink begonia flowers. The smile on the face of Hiyuki’s mother was like the beautiful flowers.

The three year old Hiyuki in her arms was probably very happy to be with her mother, and was all smiles. Besides them was a woman with a stern expression and an elegant aura. She wore a kimono with her hands overlapping gracefully in front of her, standing tall with her back straight. This should be Hiyuki’s grandmother.

She does look like a strict person...

“This grandma is like a daughter of a noble clan born in the Taisho era, a woman who survived alone through the ravages of war. That’s how she feels.”
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taish%C5%8D_period>

Aeka furrowed her brows.

“No, it’s impossible for her to be born in the Taisho era.”

Sakutarou retorted.

“Hmm…? This was the time you visited the aquarium?”

Ao’s gaze rested on the little Hiyuki who was standing nervously before an aquarium tank. A woman wearing a long skirt and white glove was holding Hiyuki’s tiny hand.

Hiyuki wore a cute short sleeved frilly blouse, a pink skirt and a flower shaped bag on her back.

“Is the person wearing the glove your mother?”

“Mother... have allergies, on days when ultra violet rays were strong, she would wear her gloves...”

A white and shiny dorsal fin and a grey tail could be seen on the corner of the photo.

“It is cut off, buy... this is a... Kitefin shark.”

Hiyuki muttered in a heavy voice:

“I am very afraid of Kitefin sharks, mother said that Kitefin sharks are powerful creatures that move on their own and won’t form groups, and I have to be strong like the Kitefin sharks…”

“The words of this mother are incredible.”

Aeka mumbled.

Indeed, it is too ambitious to tell a three year old girl to be like a Kitefin shark.

Hiyuki said as she sobbed:

“It’s all because of grandmother. She kept blaming mother saying you are too weak, too weak. Mother was conscious about that, that’s why she asked me to become strong. Grandmother also told me… Your mother is a really frail person… You can’t be like your mother. She would frown and sigh as she said that…”

From Hiyuki’s perspective, her mother didn’t die from illness, but was murdered by her grandmother’s accusations.

Aeka felt very sorry for Hiyuki.

“Don’t go back to your grandmother’s place. If you want to find a place to live by yourself, we will help. We will help you find work too, with your looks, there are plenty of job opportunities.”

Aeka was ready to call the director of her agency at any moment.

“Hey Ao-kun, you think so too right?”

Aeka turned towards Ao.

Ao placed the photo onto the floor and replied quietly:

“… I think Hyonomiya-san should return home and have a good talk with her grandmother.”

Hiyuki opened her eyes wide and her shoulders trembled from fear. Aeka couldn’t believe it and yelled:

“What are you saying, Ao-kun! She couldn’t take it and ran away precisely because the other party wouldn’t listen. What’s the point of going back?”

Ao’s words seemed to have dealt a huge blow to Hiyuki. She looked at Ao with watery eyes, and muttered with her trembling lips:

“G-Grandmother... won’t listen to me... I-I have nothing to say to her too... S-So... Can I not... go back?”

Ao understand how depressed and helpless Hiyuki was feeling. She looked straight at Hiyuki and said firmly:

“If Hyonomiya-san’s grandmother hates you like you said, it would be better to live apart. If that is true, I will stand on your side, and help you no matter what. But before that, I have some things I want to

confirm.”

“… Some things… You want to confirm?”

The lips with a mole besides it uttered these words timidly, her transparent eyes showed signs of confusion.

Aeka who was puffing her cheeks angrily besides Hiyuki and Sakutarou who remained silent behind her listened carefully to what Ao said. Aeka was not satisfied, while Sakutarou was smiling.

Ao nodded strongly.

“When you write a novel, the scenery you see would be different if you change to the perspective of another character, and would notice foreshadowing that is not apparent before. After listening to Hyonomiya-san’s words, there are several points I am concerned about, so let us go confirm them.”

After drying her uniform with a dryer, Hiyuki put them on again and left the condo with Ao. Braving the icy rain, they came to Hiyuki’s house, which was a large japanese style mansion like what Ao heard from his classmates. The courtyard that was obviously bigger than the surrounding residence was enclosed in tall, coffee coloured fencing. On the grand looking gate was a sign engraved with a formal looking ‘Hyonomiya’.

Before coming here, Aeka made a phone call to Hiyuki’s grandmother,

saying they were taking care of Hiyuki right now. Following Sakutarou’s instruction, Aeka’s voice was: 27 years old, librarian, elegant and steady, the voice of a mature big sister who was gentle and reliable. The reply from the other end of the line was:

“I will pick up my granddaughter right away! Please tell me the address!”

It sounded rather stern.

“I-I couldn’t talk to… grandmother right now.”

With Hiyuki beside him, Ao grabbed the phone from Aeka.

“You don’t need to pick up Hyonomiya-san personally, Madam grandmother. My name is Kazetani, I am her classmate. I will send Hyonomiya-san back home.”

Ao said.

The two of them sat in the back seat of a taxi and Ao held Hiyuki’s hand the whole journey. Hiyuki held Ao’s hand uneasily saying in a barely audible voice every now and then: ‘Grandmother won’t forgive me.’ ‘She still hasn’t forgiven the fact that father and mother married and gave birth to me.’ ‘No matter what I say, it is useless.’

The taxi driver looked worried and kept peeking at them, wondering if they were a pair of high school lovers eloping. Maybe they were going to a suicide pact?

Hiyuki slumped her body at the gate, and Ao said to her gently:

“Let’s go in.”

They passed through the gate.

After carefully walking on the slippery stone paved pathway that had gotten wet from the rain, came to the door and pressed the bell. The sliding door opened immediately.

A wrinkled, bony hand reached for Ao and Hiyuki, and which made Hiyuki held her breathe.

She was probably waiting anxiously at the entrance.

With an expression sterner than the one she had in the photograph, the elderly lady wearing a kimono glared at Hiyuki with a strict look. She then pulled on Hiyuki’s arm and dragged her towards the house.

“No!”

Hiyuki shook off the hand of her grandmother, which angered her grandmother further. She furrowed her brows and shouted:

“What are you doing!? You are not permitted to leave this house!”

She then looked at Ao with eyes that threatened to pierce through him.

“Please leave, this is a family matter. Don’t talk to me or my

granddaughter ever again.”

Ao took a step forward as if he was shielding Hiyuki behind him, and muttered in his heart:

Calm down.

He then answered very calmly and honestly:

“I can’t do that.”

The gaze of Hiyuki’s grandmother had an intense emotion known as hatred mixed in. Her eyes sent a chill down Ao’s back, but he continued.

He was already sweating under his clothes, and Ao was careful to not let her notice. She couldn’t let Hiyuki’s grandmother think that this was just playful words of a high schooler and looked at her firmly.

“I am here to help Hyonomiya-san’s grandmother. To let Hyonomiya-san understand that her grandmother raised her with love and concern.”

Hiyuki’s grandmother and Hiyuki who was slumped besides Ao both looked surprised, which turned into doubt.

Hiyuki’s grandmother glared at Ao, and said in a stern voice:

“Foolish, I am raising this child because it is my obligation. Because this child’s mother was too weak, and passed away with a broken heart after her husband abandoned her, so no other person would take her in.”

Hiyuki’s face twisted in pain and said:

“Y-You should know, Kazetani-kun… Grandmother hates me… She told mother that I am a burden and is so cold it makes others shiver…”

The expression on Hiyuki’s grandmother turned stiff, she furrowed her brows and said coldly:

“You heard that, Hiyuki?”

“Yes, mother said in tears that she never expected to divorce, and grandmother scolded her saying that was why you objected so much — Mother didn’t died because of father, it’s all because of grandmother... Because grandmother keep blaming mother for marrying my father, and having me.”

Hiyuki’s grandmother didn’t deny this. Her thin and stern face was tense. With her lips tightly close, she looked at her granddaughter who was accusing her with eyes on the verge of freezing.

Ao said:

“That’s wrong, Hyonomiya-san. Grandmother might have really said that, but her intention was different from what Hyonomiya-san imagined. It was the same for the other matters — Am I right, grandmother?”

“……”

Hiyuki’s grandmother fell into silence. Her brows, cheeks, lips remained unmoving. Placing one hand over her other thin hand, she stood there in a formal posture.

This person is always wearing an ice cold mask, unwilling to reveal her true emotions.
Ao felt a stab of pain in his chest.

— I will pick up my granddaughter right away! Please tell me the

address!

If Hiyuki’s grandmother really hated Hiyuki, she wouldn’t have said that she would pick her up personally.

Other than that, Ao noticed a few details after listening to Hiyuki’s words.

Ao felt that maybe Hiyuki’s grandmother wasn’t the type of person Hiyuki thought she was.

Ao would reveal the foreshadowings he noticed one at a time!

First, Ao turned towards Hiyuki, who showed an expression that she didn’t understand what Ao was saying. Ao looked at her, and asked gently:

“Hyonomiya-san said that the last time you visited the aquarium with your mother, she told you to be as strong as the Kitefin shark correct?”

Hiyuki answered with a stiff expression:

“Yes... That’s right. Because grandmother always blamed mother for being too weak, too frail...”

“That wasn’t Hyonomiya-san’s mother, but what your grandmother said.”

“Huh?”

Hiyuki’s lips that had a mole beside it opened a little.

“But, I went to the aquarium with my mother…”

“Yes, Hyonomiya-san did say that this was an aquarium full of memories, that your mother took you there before she was hospitalized.”

Ao emphasized the words ‘before she was hospitalized’.

“But Hyonomiya-san’s mother was already hospitalized during that time, and couldn’t have visited the aquarium together with Hyonomiya-san.”

“What… does this mean?”

Ao explained slowly to the confused Hiyuki.

“Among the photos Hyonomiya-san have of your mother, there were some taken in the hospital room with Begonia blooming outside the window. My next door neighbour planted these trees too, and the flowers would bloom in April. That would be too early to wear short sleeves. But in the photo of the aquarium, Hyonomiya-san wore a short sleeved blouse.”

“!”

Hiyuki held her breathe.

“If that wasn’t your mother, than the one who could have brought Hyonomiya-san to the aquarium would be your grandmother. Isn’t that only natural?”

That was what Ao noticed in the beginning.

When Hiyuki visited the aquarium, Hiyuki’s mother had already been hospitalized. If so, who was the one who brought Hiyuki to the aquarium?

Hiyuki turned to her grandmother.

Hiyuki had a complicated expression of confusion, doubt and surprise. She looked to her grandmother to confirm if this was true. Hiyuki’s grandmother didn’t even move her brow, and looked back at Hiyuki coldly.

Hiyuki muttered in a voice of disbelief:

“Then… the one holding my hand in this photo isn’t my mother, but grandmother…?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Grandmother always wears a kimono. And this glove is the one mother always wears when she goes outside…”

“That’s right, because she wore gloves, that’s why Hyonomiya-san kept thinking that the one who went to the aquarium is your mother. When you think back on your childhood, you will first think of the

white gloves.”

“How could that be, I...”

Hiyuki suddenly showed an unconfident face. She probably remembered something from her early childhood.

This time, Ao shift his gaze to Hiyuki’s grandmother.

“Grandmother specially wore gloves and wore western clothes in order to put Hyonomiya-san who was attached to her mother at ease, correct? Grandmother?”

“.....”

Hiyuki’s grandmother fell into silence.

Her hands that were placed one over the other didn’t move either. Hiyuki said that the thin hands with wrinkles were scary. Since young, she must have thought her grandmother’s hand was different from her mother’s, and felt unfamiliar and terrifying.

This was common among children. For the twins in Ao’s home, the sister cried when she saw her grandfather took out his dentures. After that, she would run away whenever her grandfather came near, which made her grandfather sigh.

What if Hiyuki was like that too? Could it be that her grandmother wore a dress to cheer up her granddaughter who was getting depressed because her mother was hospitalized? And even wore the

soft gloves Hiyuki’s mother owned to conceal her bony hand for her sake?

From what Hiyuki said and the photo she showed Ao, Ao told the conclusion he drew to Hiyuki’s grandmother who was silent:

“And so, the one who mentioned Kitefin sharks to Hyonomiya-san, is you.”

— Kitefin sharks are powerful creatures that move on their own and won’t form groups.

— You have to be strong like Kitefin sharks.

That wasn’t something a mother would say to her daughter that she was leaving behind, but the words a grandmother said to her granddaughter who would lose both parents in the near future.

You might be alone, but you can’t lose.

Don’t be weak like your mother.

You have to be strong and live on.

That’s the depressing hope that she had…

Hiyuki’s grandmother continued looking into space with cold eyes. Her tense face and overlapping hands remain unmoved.

However —

— Grandmother hates me.

Using this belief of Hiyuki as the premise, and changing it into ‘Hiyuki’s grandmother is worried about her, and raised her with care’, another line of thought would be visible — Another scenery.

For example, Ao noticed another thing.

“Hyonomiya-san, you remember what your name was before your parents divorced?”

The stunned Hiyuki twitched her lips that had a mole beside it and answered:

“… Hanai.”

“Hanai Hiyuki… a gentle and cute name. It gives the image of a small energetic flower blooming in the snow. Your parents must have thought hard to choose such a suitable name. Also, which month were you born?”

“… March.”

“That would be spring, but your parents chose a name related to winter. Your mother must have wanted to give you a name that reminds you of the family name from your mother’s side. What is your mother’s name?”

“… Aika, the Kanji are love and summer, because my mother was born

in July.”

“Your mother has a lovely name too. She was probably attached to her name Hyonomiya Aika, that’s why Hyonomiya-san, her daughter as Hiyuki. But didn’t your grandmother object that name?”

“……”

“A reason was giving you a winter related name even though you were born in spring. Maybe your grandmother also considered the problem if your parents divorce and her daughter took back her family name. With two ice kanji in the name ‘Hyonomiya Hiyuki’ sounds too cold, maybe that’s what your grandmother thought?”

Hiyuki was enlightened and then fell into deep thought with her face tensed. She was probably thinking about the conversation her mother had with her grandmother.

— I heard… Grandmother talking to my mother.

— What, what about me? That’s why I objected so much!

— The person herself might not mind, but the one who have to shoulder the burden will be troubled. It is really too cold, so cold it makes one shiver…

“Grandmother wasn’t saying that Hyonomiya-san was too cold, but was worried about her granddaughter who had to change her name after her parents divorced. The people who picked the name for her granddaughter might not mind, but the child who had to shoulder the

burden would be too pitiful. That’s why your grandmother blamed your mother, but your mother said that she didn’t know she would get a divorce and take back her family name when she first got married.”

Intense and confused emotions stirred in Hiyuki’s eyes.

The childhood memories that kept playing back in her mind and filling her chest with pain actually have some other meaning, which made it hard for her to believe.

Also, her grandmother kept her lips tightly shut and back straight, keeping quiet with her back straight.

“B-But… Grandmother is very strict, and objects no matter what I do. When I caught a cold, she said it was my responsibility and to take care of myself… A-And, whenever she mentioned mother, she would talk bad about her, saying that my mother was too weak.”

“She wasn’t talking bad about her, grandmother was just warning herself. Hyonomiya-san’s mother, fell ill because of the emotional trauma of divorce, so she was determined to raise Hyonomiya-san to be a strong child.”

— Grandmother keep blaming mother saying you are too weak, too weak.

— Grandmother also told me... Your mother is a really frail person... You can’t be like your mother. She would frown and sigh as she said that...”

Ao shifted his gaze onto Hiyuki’s grandmother again.

"I heard that before Hyonomiya-san’s mother got married, grandmother cherished and doted on her a lot. I could deduce from the effort she put in to pick the name Aika. Grandmother raised Hiyuki-san’s mother, her only daughter with plenty of love and care. But wasn’t she regretting this? If she had raised her to be a stronger child, her daughter might not have died.”

Because she doted her daughter too much, she couldn’t withstand sadness and became a frail person who lost her life because of that. Did Hiyuki’s Grandmother, regret this after her daughter passed away?

Mother died because of Grandmother, when she heard Hiyuki shouted that, grandmother kept her lips coldly shut and did not refute that.

This must have been what she thought.

If I had been stricter when I raised her.

Then she wouldn’t have died.

That’s why grandmother treated her granddaughter Hiyuki in such a stern manner, even if Hiyuki held a grudge against her. All this was to raise Hiyuki to be someone who won’t lose to predicaments, a person with a strong spirit—

"Behind grandmother’s stern words and actions lies her wish to atone for her daughter and her love for her granddaughter. I am here to

confirm this point. Because this is important for Hyonomiya-san right now.”

Hiyuki’s grandmother didn’t open her tightly closed lips, her expression remained ice cold.

But her overlapping hands were slightly tensed — She was squeezing her left hand with her thin and bony right hand—

Hiyuki looked confused, and was drawn in by the pair of hands she feared all this while, staring at them.

"This… couldn’t be helped."

In the quiet atmosphere, a trembling voice suddenly echoed out.

Hiyuki raised her head in surprise.

With her eyebrows upturned and a cold glare in her eyes, Hiyuki’s grandmother glared at empty space with such a look, her thin lips remained drooping with her back straight — She muttered in a sternly — but sad voice:

"… I had Aika when I was almost forty, I am so old right now… I don’t know when I will leave Hiyuki behind… at the end of my life. I have no other relatives to count on, if I die… Hiyuki will have to live on alone… What I can do for Hiyuki is to teach her not to rely on others, have the tenacity to live on alone, and not sadden her too much if I die… That’s all I could teach her.”

With a cold expression, Hiyuki’s grandmother stared in a direction with nobody there and said in a stern tone, voicing out her thoughts hidden behind her freezing armour of ice.

She educated her so strictly so that Hiyuki would be capable of living on alone.

Not saying any gentle words and always leaving her alone was because she didn’t want Hiyuki to feel the pain of losing family again when she dies.

It would be just fine if Hiyuki hated her.

A transparent drop of tear fell from her wide open eye. Was she aware of that?

Hiyuki fluttered her eyebrows, tears oozing from her eyes too as she listened to what her grandmother said.

And then, Hiyuki spoke.

— I understood when I saw grandmother cry, that the one who told me about Kitefin shark and bought the Kitefin shark pencil for me was grandmother.

— The person who told me to become strong had a very strict voice, and I felt scared just like the time I saw the Kitefin shark. But when I peeked up, a teardrop as beautiful as a pearl fell from that person’s face… I always thought that was my mother.

However, when she saw the tears streaming down her grandmother’s face, it overlapped with the face that shedded pearl like tears in her memory.

— That reminds me of so many things. The reason grandmother wasn’t in the photo was because she told the person taking the picture for us: ‘please capture just my granddaughter, an old lady wouldn’t look good in a photo.’

The person helping to take the picture was at a loss.

Her grandmother then muttered after the fact: ‘How could I let other see my frivolous look? People will think I have gone crazy.’

When she ate the steamed bun handmade by her grandmother, the young Hiyuki would complain: ‘This isn’t sweet… I don’t want to eat this.’ Her grandmother would say: ‘Your mother ate too much sweet snacks when she was young, and had serious cavities. She was picky about food when she grew up and had a lot of allergies… ‘ Before Hiyuki finish her food, grandmother would watch her carefully. After she was done and said ‘Thank you for the meal’, her grandmother would keep a strict face with the corners of her mouth in a frown, pat her head and says: ‘Good girl.’

— Grandmother would say gentle words to me before my mother died…

She was actually a clumsy person.

Keeping a distance from her granddaughter, not showing how she

cared for her, but would make snacks for her to eat, and would pat her head with unfamiliar movements.

She brought the depressed Hiyuki to the aquarium, and bought a Kitefin shark mechanical pencil for her.

—— Thanks to Kazetani-kun, I remembered that grandmother is actually a gentle person.

The lips with a mole besides it parted in a smile as Hiyuki said that.

And now ——

The grandmother and granddaughter watched over by Ao told each other their true feelings for the first time.

“I-I know that grandmother really detest anime and manga, but I won’t give up on reading and writing light novels.” Hiyuki did her best to convey her feelings, and her grandmother looked at her with stern eyes and said:

“Aika drew a lot of such mangas too, and joined a video game club online where she met your father. She was still a college student, but she fell deeply in love with a man eight years her senior, and want to marry him no matter what. But that man had an affair with a woman in the same club and bore a child, so he divorced Aika and went to live with that woman. Just what was he unsatisfied about Aika? She might act pettishly, lack tenacity and was bad at housework, but she was cute, frank and gentle. Abandoning her after marrying her, the men in such anime clubs must all be like that.”

“I-I didn’t join any clubs, and not all fans of anime or light novels are like that.”

Hyonomiya-san can finally talk to her grandmother and express herself.

Ao looked at the red faced Hiyuki who was facing her grandmother bravely.

There won’t be any problems now...

“They are all similar things. In the beginning, Aika only shut herself in her room to play video games. Over time, she joined the gathering organized by the club and played until morning before coming home.”

"I am not my mother, I, I won’t... only come home in the morning."

"But didn’t you run away from home?"

"That’s because..."

"And you brought a boy home."

Ao was shocked when the topic turned towards her. Hiyuki’s grandmother walked towards him very bluntly.

"Please don’t deceive my granddaughter. If this child turned out like her mother too, I will—"

"Grandmother!"

Hiyuki stopped her with a pale face.

“Our family has always been plagued by useless men, leading to unhappiness. My daughter, my mother, my grandmother all suffered a lot because of men. When I was pregnant with Aika, my husband at that time committed crimes that goes against public morals and was sent to the police station, so we divorced. The man said in his police statement he did that because he was under a lot of stress after marrying into the family, what an embarrassment. Although we only married after a marriage interview, he was rather manly when we first tied the knot. Shortly after our divorce, he married a young woman fifteen years his junior.”

She is comparing me with such people…

Ao back off a little.

"N-Not just mother, even grandmother, grandmother’s mother, and grandmother’s grandmother too…?"

Ao saw a flustered Hiyuki.

Hiyuki’s grandmother continued walking towards Ao.

“That’s why I didn’t look for a son to marry into the family, but let Aika marry away. Even if the Hyonomiya family line ends, as long as Aika could be happy, even if it was someone she met in a video game club, eight years older than her, looked unreliable, a red haired man born in France was fine too. But that man abandoned Aika and Hiyuki, and ran

off with another woman—"

Hiyuki’s grandmother voice choked, as if she was trying to swallow something that had welled up.

Seeing her grandmother averted her head with a blink, Hiyuki furrowed her brows.

Ao’s heart ached a little.

Hyonomiya-san’s mother probably chose her name in remembrance of her old family name out of gratitude for her mother’s feelings… Hiyuki’s grandmother really doted on her only daughter.

But when all of her daughter’s wishes were fulfilled, she lost that precious daughter of hers. The pain must have been agonizing.

In order to avoid making the same mistake, she educated Hiyuki strictly, not letting her come into contact with anything related to anime or manga. Ao could empathize with how she felt, and felt that blaming her would be too much.

Hiyuki also looked at her Grandmother as if she was on the verge of tears.

Hiyuki’s grandmother kept her head turned, not looking at Ao as she said in a stiff, sobbing voice:

"My mother passed away at 77. I am 75 now, I only have two years left. Even if Hiyuki gets abandoned by a man and come back here, I

won’t be able to receive her here… That’s why I hope Hiyuki can choose a life without depending on a man or anyone. Is that wrong?”

Hiyuki’s grandmother turned her head back suddenly, and Ao straightened his body on reflex.

The face staring at Ao was tensed, showing her will to protect her granddaughter no matter what.

Ahh… Hyonomiya-san’s grandmother, is really worried about Hyonomiya-san...

His chest heating up, Ao maintained his posture and said calmly:

"Would Hyonomiya-san be happy like this?"

Hiyuki’s grandmother was speechless.

"Hyonomiya-san isn’t living by herself as grandmother wished. Before I started talking to Hyonomiya-san about light novels, I have never seen Hyonomiya-san smile before. But recently, Hyonomiya-san had become more approachable and would smile warmly."

Ao wasn’t criticizing Hiyuki’s grandmother for her way of doing things, or intended to refute her. He was plainly stating what he observed calmly and honestly.

Hiyuki’s grandmother held her hands together tightly as Hiyuki looked at Ao with watery eyes.

"As Hyonomiya-san’s friend, I hope she can always smile."

"I… I also..."

Hiyuki’s grandmother was hesitant about speaking. Her throat trembled as she blinked her eyes. She must be thinking about saying: ‘I also wish for that.”

“The average lifespan of a woman is 85 years old, and the trend is on the rise. Grandmother will definitely live more than two years… And you still look energetic and young now.”

Ao said with a smile. Hiyuki’s grandmother brows that had eased up furrow once again.

“Impossible, all the women in our family died before 80, no one in our family register lived beyond 80!”

Grandmother refuted.

"Even discounting that, I am sixty years older than Hiyuki." Grandmother blinked and averted her face.

At this point, Hiyuki spoke.

"Grandmother, I… light novels are something very important and wonderful to me, I want to talk to grandmother every day… about how strong I have become after I knew about light novels and Kazetani-kun, brave enough to talk to grandmother, and I will be strong in the future too… In the world of light novels, there are Kitefin sharks that aren’t by themselves… I want to… spend some time and tell you

about these things bit by bit…”

Hiyuki’s grandmother kept her head averted, as if she was suppressing her overflowing emotions, listening to Hiyuki with a blank face. Her thin and bony hands was a bit pale because she was gripping too tightly — The way she looked seemed to overlapped with Hiyuki who had a lot to say, but kept her gaze and head down — *The two of them are really similar*, Ao thought.

Not just their looks, their characters were similar too.

Their serious side, and their clumsy side.

Both of them had the delicacy and kindness to think about others.

Hyonomiya-san isn’t like her mother, she takes after her grandmother.

Hiyuki mustered all her courage and held her grandmother’s hand fearfully.

The thin, bony hands engraved with wrinkled — The hands that held Hiyuki’s hands when she was young. Hiyuki closed her own pale soft hands around that pair of hands.

"Two years won’t be enough to say it all. Ten, twenty or even thirty years won’t be enough… So, please live on…”

The shoulders of Hiyuki’s grandmother shook and her voice was whimpering. Her tense face, lips and brows were on the verge of breaking down—

All the foreshadowing had been revealed.

The relationship between Hiyuki and her grandmother would slowly change in the future.

This old house would become a comfortable and warm place for Hiyuki to stay in. Hiyuki’s grandmother shook off her hand coldly.

“Don’t talk here in the entrance, come on in… You too.”

Grandmother glanced at Ao with a sharp gaze, straightened her back, and walked into the mansion.

Chapter 6: The Day of Parting At the End of Summer

After the rainy season ended, it was now July, Ao and Hiyuki’s story creation activity continued.

The bashful smile Hiyuki only showed Ao in the cafe after school appeared frequently in the classroom recently.

“Hyonomiya-san’s expression has turned so gentle.”

“There wasn’t any icy feeling when I talked to her. She would blush easily, how cute.”

“The way she lower her gaze and head is cute too, even though I am a girl, I am charmed by her.”

“I know I know, it’s the same for me.”

When the girls invited her to have lunch together, Hiyuki answered happily:

“T-Thank you.”

She was popular among the boys too.

“The Hyonomiya-san in the past felt unapproachable, like someone from a different world. But now, it feels like you is within reach.”

“Yeah, she had no openings at all in the past, I won’t even consider wooing her and making her my girl. But if the current Hyonomiya-san can be my girlfriend, I will die happy.”

Ao listened with complicated feelings.

“Impossible, Hyonomiya-san already have Ao. That guy accompanies Hyonomiya-san after school every day.”

“Damn, if I only made a move like Ao did before any competition showed up.”

“Nicely done, Ao.”

Ao couldn’t smile at all as he watched the envious eyes of his classmates.

“I am not dating Hyonomiya-san.”

He said with a calm voice. His classmates didn’t mean any harm when they said ‘nicely done’, but it stabbed him right in the chest.

“… The girls in class are asking me, whether I am dating Kazetani-

kun… How should I… answer?”

“The same as usual. Just say that we are participating in a hobby together, we are not dating. That’s how I answered.”

“… Yes.”

This stiff and bitter conversation happened last week.

Is that answer really fine?

Ao didn’t know either. His heart felt conflicted when he saw Hiyuki lower her head.

Back in May when the spring breeze moved the lustrous greeneries, they made a promise to complete a manuscript, and started this project. It will be ending soon as they entered July.

— Please take care of me for the next two months.

— Me too, please take care of me for the next two months.

Hiyuki bowed anxiously, and Ao responded with a smile and a nervous heart. Recently, he kept thinking about their conversation back then.

… *It would be the two months deadline I made with Hyonomiya-san soon.*

When they collected twenty cafe stamps — Three days before the submission deadline for the newcomer contest — 12th July, Hiyuki finished her manuscript.

“… Do you really think that this ending is fine?”

After placing the finished manuscript before her, Hiyuki looked at Ao with an uneasy look.

Her lips that had a mole besides it opened slightly, as if she felt that something wasn’t enough.

The story that comprises entirely of everyday life events ended with the main character Subaru returning to his life in the modern world, and parting with Cyan.

At the beach where they had their first date, Subaru was surrounded by moonlight and was gradually fading away. Cyan rushed as fast as she could to his side.

Subaru kept shouting ‘thank you’ to Cyan, the two confessed their feelings to each other.

With the memory warming his heart, Cyan slowly disappeared.

When they started writing this story, it had been decided that this would be the ending.

The ending of a slice of life story would be more compatible with a heartwarming farewell. Hiyuki also understood that all good things had to come to an end, and agreed with a face of acceptance.

Ao also approved of that ending.

However, in Hiyuki's first version, Subaru realized that he would be leaving soon, but the everyday life story continued.

Ao suggested that Hiyuki should follow the original setting, describe the parting scene well, and end it there, so the reader knew for sure that the story had ended and create a wonderful ending with a good aftertaste. So after two revisions, Subaru finally bidded farewell to Cyan in the third version.

When Hiyuki showed the 2nd revision to Ao, she asked with an unconfident gaze: Was the previous ending better?

Ao smiled, and answered the same way as last time.

"I think this is the right way, the story should end properly on a good note."

"... But, this way, everything would be over."

Hiyuki pleaded in a soft voice. She wanted to avoid ending the story.

Ao said gently:

“It’s fine, just let it be.”

“……”

The disappointed look in Hiyuki’s eyes bothered him, but Ao continued speaking with a calm expression.

“Light novels are basically a series of works. Among the submissions, many people would post entries under the premise that a sequel would be written. But I think that should wait until the work win a prize and is ready to be published before discussing with the editors to decide if they should end it at one volume. Wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing for the work if it could end properly?”

Among light novels, it was hard to end the popular series.

The professional authors had to think about the events to come, continue to intrigue the readers as they wrote a never ending story.

Sometimes, they had to cut the story halfway because it was doing poorly in sales.

But contest entries were not bounded by such situations.

Everything could be resolved in a single volume, and given in a proper ending.

That’s why Ao always felt it was a pity when he read an unfinished submission.

It could have ended on a good note, but mysteries were left unsolved, foreshadowings were left untouched, no romance developed and the story just proceeded.

‘Please take care of me in the sequel too.’

When Ao saw this final line, he hoped from the bottom of his heart that such an interesting tale could be concluded in one volume.

‘XX War Chronicles Chapter Two’

When he sees such a title, Ao would read the catalogue again and think: What about chapter one and three?

If the editorial department paid more attention to detail and post all three works to the same screener, that would be great. But from Ao’s experience, that happens rarely. The work would probably be sent to different screeners, and each of them could only read a part of it.

Even if it was an unfinished work with a sequel, if it was a masterpiece that made one want to read the next volume no matter what, it might pass through the 2nd and 3rd round and win a prize.

That might be so, but with the negative comment of ‘unfinished work’, it would be hard for it to pass through the selections. Ao wouldn’t recommend Hiyuki to take such a laborious path.

“But, but… if it ends here… Subaru and Cyan… might never… meet again.”

Hiyuki who was sitting opposite him continued with tears in her eyes.

“Just leave it to the readers. If the readers feel that Subaru and Cyan can meet again, they will naturally imagine the tale where they reunite. By ending this story, the readers will carry on and create new ones.”

Ao said, and Hiyuki showed a lonely expression.

“Will my story… disappear?”

Ao felt a stab of pain in his chest because Hiyuki’s eyes and voice sounded so sad.

However, he kept his warm and gentle demeanour and told Hiyuki:

“If you want to keep this story for yourself, you can simply not show it to anyone. If you want others to read it, you have to have the resolve to let it go.”

And then, as if he was pushing Hiyuki to make her resolve, Ao looked into Hiyuki’s eyes and asked:

“Do you want to give up on entering the contest?”

“……”

Hiyuki lowered her gaze and closed her lips with a mole besides it to ponder, she then lift her gaze gently and replied with a determined face:

“… No.”

Ao smiled, that was the answer he was hoping for. However, the pain in his chest grew stronger, that was the sentimental feelings of Ao’s wilfullness.

For a moment, I was hoping that Hyonomiya-san would give up…

He must never speak of this.

“Well then, the manuscript is completed. You just need to write a synopsis and character introduction, then post it out.”

“… Yes.”

Hiyuki nodded with sadness lingering in her eyes.

“We promised to eat a cake to celebrate after finishing the manuscript.”

“… Yes.”

“Pardon me.”

Ao called the waitress over.

He showed his point collection card to the waitress.

“Can we use the point card now?”

“Yes, no problem. This card entitles you to a handmade cake, I will send it to you later.”

They collected twenty stamps in total. They could get a free handmade cake for every ten stamps. This was the second time he was eating the handmade cake with Hiyuki.

The last time we ate the cake was to celebrate Hyonomiya-san and her grandmother making up...

She told her grandmother the good points about light novels, but her grandmother’s bias was too deep, so she was still fighting hard —— Hiyuki said happily as her lips with a mole beside it blossomed in a smile.

It might take a lot of time, but it would be great if her grandmother understands.

Grandmother still adopted the attitude of ‘books with manga-like covers are lowly and harmful’ in front of Hiyuki, but Hiyuki discovered the light novel her grandmother was hiding in the living room.

There is a flower bookmark on page 50, grandmother must be reading it secretly when I am not around.

It felt strange imagining that.

Hiyuki giggled, and Ao laughed too. Where did Hiyuki’s grandmother got that light novel?

Last time, they ate a roll cake with walnuts fillings, whip cream and chocolate mousse on top. It was very sweet and delicious.

“Sorry for the wait, here is today’s handmade cake.”

The waitress placed a plate before Hiyuki, on it were a Peach soufflé and a milk coffee cake with whip cream on top.

After the waitress left, Ao bowed politely to Hiyuki:

“Congratulations on finishing your manuscript.”

Hiyuki nodded courteously too:

“Thank you for giving your opinion on the project, and all the help you gave me.”

And the two of them raised their head, with both parties feeling a little lonely.

“Let’s dig in.”

“… Yes.”

They picked up their fork.

The cake this time was delicious too, as good as the last one, but their conversation wasn’t as lively.

“… How’s your grandmother?”

“… The bookmark is at page 150.”

“… It’s going smoothly.”

“… Not really.”

Both of them had the tone of having something stuffed in their mouth, as they chatted about how they were doing.

Hiyuki’s curfew had been extended an hour. When they finished the cake and left the cafe, the walls and roof in the alley had already been dyed red by the setting evening sun.

The air was warm and gentle too.

Ao and Hiyuki’s house were in the opposite direction.

That was why the two of them always parted ways here.

After saying ‘see you in school’ with a smile, Ao would rode on his bicycle while Hiyuki would walked and return home.

In the beginning, they were always smiling when they bidded farewell, their chest full of excitement as they thought about the details of their conversation with sweet emotions.

But today—

“……”

“……”

Neither of them said good bye as they stood there while staring at each other’s face.

Hiyuki was hesitant to speak, with an anxious and sad expression.

I probably looked the same…

Ao could imagine what Hiyuki wanted to ask Ao, and her uneasiness towards Ao.

Because Ao wanted to ask Hiyuki the same thing and bore the same uneasiness.

As Hiyuki’s work neared completion, his growing feeling of unease and loneliness.

Can I greet Hiyonomiya-san in the future and chat with her…?

Hiyuki was definitely thinking asking the same thing.

— After the two months deadline and the manuscript is done, will things stay the same?

All their classmates thought that Ao and Hiyuki were dating.

After doing something so conspicuous in school, and going off

together every day, it was natural for others to think they were dating.

But the truth was, Ao and Hiyuki were just a manuscript submitter and a manuscript editor. Normally, they wouldn’t know each other’s name, their unusual relationship only started because they were coincidentally in the same class.

Ao helped Hiyuki with her manuscript, and Hiyuki finally finished her work.

And so, Ao’s role as an advisor would be done.

It was the same in their personal live, Hiyuki had made up with her grandmother and become part of the class. It might just be a little, but she could express herself now. The Hiyuki now was much more charming then the Hiyuki who hid herself in her frozen palace with the nickname ‘Ice Maiden’.

Hyonomiya-san don’t have confidence in herself, so she wants to hang out with me. But that’s probably because I am the first person who is kind to her.

That situation was a sort of coincidental punishment to Ao for seeing Hiyuki’s name in the personal detail column of the manuscripts. He shouldn’t have approach the contestant after getting their personal data from his work.

He was needed to reflect on this, for gaining Hiyuki’s trust by using his position as a manuscript screener — In a sense, the fact he used improper means to garner goodwill from Hiyuki made Ao uncomfortable.

Ever since he saw Hiyuki greeting their classmates, eating with the girls and smiling happily, Ao started troubling over this.

Hyonomiya-san will be fine without me.

Even if it isn’t me ── If someone else gave her a hand, she could become good friends with everyone.

── Well done, Ao.

That was why such words of his classmates stabbed so deeply into his heart.

The relationship between Ao and Hiyuki was special because they were linked as an author and editor.

However, from the standards of a boy and a girl in the second year of high school ── compared to Ao who was average in grades, sports and looks, Hiyuki was like and outstanding flower on the highest peak, and everyone only watched her from afar because she was too perfect. But that situation was gone, with everyone fighting to greet Hiyuki, she had become an existence far away from Ao.

When he was misunderstood by Hiyuki because of Aeka, Ao grabbed Hiyuki hand and led her away in front of their classmates to the door leading to the roof. The emotions burning in his hard as he tried to resolve the misunderstanding had mellowed a lot.

Back then, he didn’t prioritize how Hiyuki might feel and just wanted

to convey his feelings to Hiyuki, that’s why he did that.

It was different to that summer in his second year of middle school, when he prioritized the feelings of the girl he had a crush on. This time, he won’t back down.

Where did my emotions that were burning hot from back then go…?

Hiyuki stood under the evening light before Ao.

Even though we are so close that we can touch just by reaching out our hands...

He tried moving his fingers that were drooping down.

However, he couldn’t raise his hand, so Ao said with a calm voice:

“You worked hard for the past two months…”

Hiyuki’s eyes started wavering, and she moved her lips with a mole besides it a little.

“… Thank you for your hard work too, Kazetani-kun.”

She muttered.

“Well then, see you in school tomorrow.”

“… Yes.”

After turning his back on the depressed Hiyuki, Ao stepped onto the

pedal of his bicycle.

He looked back several time as he cycled, and he could see the back of Hiyuki and her brown hair that had a golden glow about her.

He watched her with squinted eyes for a second or two, then continued to pedal.

The scene of Subaru parting with Cyan that was written by Hiyuki flashed in her mind.

Subaru stood on the beach illuminated by the silvery moonlight as Cyan rushed towards him.

Subaru shouted to Cyan at the top of his voice:

“Thank you! Thank you!”

I am thankful for meeting you.

Thank you for finding me.

Thank you for treating me well.

After meeting you, I changed for the first time.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Subaru’s hand was engulfed in white light and faded away gradually. Cyan held on to his hand and the two of them confessed at this last moment.

“I love Cyan.”

“I really love Subaru.”

After conveying his feelings to the person he loved the most and hearing her reply in the same way, Subaru smiled and slowly vanished.

“I love you, I always have.”

As he listened to Cyan’s voice.

… *A wonderful ending. There is nothing wrong with ending this way. That’s right, using the parting scene to end it will leave a good aftertaste, that’s what I said.*

It was the same for reality.

Instead of giving chase reluctantly, it was better to keep the wonderful memories in his heart and part ways, so he would remain a wonderful presence in her mind too.

So even if his chest felt painful and bitter, he had to endure it.

Before the gulf with Hiyuki was filled, they reached the ending of the first semester.

After getting their results slip and before school was out, Ao approached Hiyuki and asked:

“Have you posted the manuscript?”

“… Yes.”

Hiyuki nodded with a lonely expression. After Ao confirmed this,

“I hope you can pass the first round of selection.”

Ao said with a smile.

“Well then, see you after summer vacation.”

He walked out of the classroom alone.

“And? It’s summer vacation, why aren’t you going on a date with your girlfriend, but spending your time in the mountain of manuscripts? Ao?”

Just like what he described, Ao looked as if he was buried by cardboard boxes as he read the manuscripts single mindedly.

Sakutarou looked displeased as he asked.

“And you are doing it in my place.”

“That’s right, we will be conscious of Ao-kun and can’t be lovey dovey.”

Aeka said, but she was always hugging Sakutarou, sitting on his lap and kissing him even when Ao was there.

“The twins at my place will want me to play with them, so I won’t be able to read it quietly. Uncle Saku, you know that I took on 200 books for July and August, I won’t be able to finish if I don’t concentrate on reading.”

“Why did you take on so many? I can’t do anything about the number you stated, but I have to hold some responsibility if I turn down the publishers so bluntly. As for expenses for the date, didn’t you saved all the money you earned through manuscript screening? It should be a lot. Or are you planning to buy her an unbelievably expensive gift? Compared to money, woman will prefer your heart.”

“Ara, we want expensive gifts too. Because that is the proof of your love for your girlfriend.”

Aeka said immediately.

Ao shift his gaze away from the two of them and said coldly:

“I don’t plan to go out on dates, because Hyonomiya-san is not my

girlfriend. Her manuscript is finished, so we don’t have any reason to meet now.”

Even though he was saying that, his chest was aching.

Ahhh… My relationship with Hyonomiya is only possible because of the manuscripts…

Hiyuki’s lonely expression when they bidded farewell at the entrance of the cafe flashed in his mind. He felt as if his throat was being constricted, but for Hiyuki’s sake, Ao think this was the best choice.

It’s better for Hyonomiya-san to keep some distance from me. She is no longer alone, if we increase our distance, she will know that aside from my work as a manuscript screener, I am just an ordinary high schooler in every other way.

Just Ao by himself wasn’t special to Hiyuki.

After Ao become silent, Sakutarou suddenly spoke:

“Ao, are you an idiot?”

The manuscripts in his hands were snatched away by Sakutarou suddenly.

Before Ao realized it, Sakutarou was standing before him, and looking down at him with an unhappy face. Aeka besides him was also looking at Ao with a frown.

“Where is the you that said you would go back with her when she ran

away from home? You were so cool when you side decisively to her grandmother that you two will go there together! It was so touching! In the end, you can only fight alongside her when she was frail? Can't you be together with the energetic her? You can offer a helping hand to those who are doing worse than you, but is afraid of people that isn't like that, isn't that shameful?"

It was a rare sight to see Sakutarou angry.

Ao was stunned when he heard what his uncle said.

… *I see, because Hyonomiya-san is alone and had no one else to turn to, that's why I could hang out with her. Keeping a distance away from Hyonomiya-san for her own good is just an excuse, maybe I just have an inferiority complex when I am with Hyonomiya-san…*

When he saw how hard it hit Ao after Ao realized how small minded he was, Sakutarou said with a bitter expression:

"No matter which manuscript is before you, you can judge it with unbiasedness right? Not overbearing, no prejudice, not subjective when you read the manuscripts happily, why couldn't you see your own matters in the same way? Your uncle is really sad…"

Sakutarou looked at Ao with a really depressed face and continued:

"Back in the cafe, didn't you tell her the reason the heroine like the main character? Isn't that how you actually feel?"

Aeka who looked worried beside Sakutarou added:

“Hyonomiya-san looked very happy when Ao said that. I almost cried too.”

Ao sat on the floor quietly as he listened to the adult’s serious deliberation with a bitter heart.

He then returned home and thought about what Sakutarou and Aeka said in his room alone.

How I actually feel about this...

“Hiyuki, are you heading out?”

Hiyuki was putting on slippers with white straps for the summer at the entrance when her grandmother called her, so she turned her head.

“Yes, I’m heading for the library and will be back before curfew.”

“I see…”

Grandmother looked down at the bag Hiyuki was carrying with a stern expression.

“… Recently, the library is stocking up on light novels too, it makes me sigh.”

She muttered.

It sounded like something she heard from others, but grandmother would never discuss about light novels with others, so she probably searched for light novels in the library herself.

Hiyuki’s lips curled in a smile.

“Hiyuki, are you meeting someone in the library? For example, that Kazetani-kun.”

The corner of Hiyuki’s lips drooped immediately.

“… No, I didn’t make any plans to meet with Kazetani-kun over summer vacation.”

Grandmother’s eyebrow twitched. She showed a hard to pleased expression and closed her mouth tightly, but still said softly:

“It’s fine to meet once in a while.”

“… Kazetani-kun is busy.”

Hiyuki answered quietly too, then without waiting for a reply,

“I’m going now.”

She walked out of the door.

There was still some time before evening and the sun rays showed no signs of waning. The courtyard might be cool, but the heat from the

tar road seemed to be emitting heat. Looking closely, she could see the air wavering from the rising heat.

“It’s hot…”

Hiyuki wiped her sweat with her hands as she thought about Ao.

Kazetani-kun… he is probably working as a screener… and reading manuscripts...

In the two weeks since summer vacation began — Hiyuki often thought about Ao.

Ao said that the story in the manuscript should end properly. He said he will see her again after the summer break. The calm eyes Ao had back then. Hiyuki kept thinking about these scenes and the meaning behind them.

I don’t have any friends and have a gloomy personality, so Kazetani-kun took pity on me and taught me to write light novels… Because Kazetani-kun is very gentle… When I asked him to help me write light novels, he probably accepted because he couldn’t reject me...

And in the two months that followed, Ao didn’t show any signs that he dislike it, accompanying Hiyuki with her writing sessions after school every day.

… Thanks to Kazetani-kun, I could talk to everyone in class now, and don’t find grandmother scary anymore… I can read and write light novels at home now...

Ao must have felt that he finished his mission.

— The girls in class are asking me, whether I am dating Kazetani-kun… How should I… answer?

Hiyuki asked with a pounding heart, and Ao answered gently:

— “The same as usual. Just say that we are participating in a hobby together, we are not dating. That’s how I answered.”

He wasn’t embarrassed or look troubled at all, Ao said it in a calm and gentle manner.

Hiyuki felt her chest constrict.

— … Yes.

That’s the only way she could answer.

Just like Subaru parting with Cyan, I can’t rely on Kazetani-kun anymore…

In truth, she didn’t want the story to end.

In the beginning, she felt Subaru going back to the real world was natural, because all good things comes to an end. However, the more time she spent with Ao, the more hesitant she was about this parting scene.

She wanted to write a gentle story about everyday life.

The people who read that story will definitely think that after Subaru and Cyan parted, they will go on to live their own lives… Kazetani-kun and I also...

Hiyuki returned the book back to the library with its overpowered air conditioner, and chose a new book. She also browsed the shelf for new novels, saw the first volume of the series recommended by Ao, and borrowed that one too.

Two reference books for her next work and one light novel, she borrowed three books in total. When she left the library the air had already been dyed in faint orange.

It would be evening soon.

Hiyuki recalled melancholically about the day she parted with Ao at the entrance of the cafe again, as she carried her bags with the books on her shoulder while walking down the road.

I should… visit the cafe.

The thought flashed across her mind.

Ao might be there.

What am I thinking, there is no way Kazetani-kun would be there...

But once that thought surfaced on her mind, her legs brought her unconsciously to the entrance of the cafe which Hiyuki have yet to visit in three weeks.

“Welcome, seat for one?”

The familiar waitress asked.

Hiyuki surveyed the inside of the store.

Aside from the middle aged lady seated besides the window, there wasn’t any other customer.

“Miss…?”

The waitress called out to Hiyuki as she was standing there idly. Hiyuki came back to her senses right then.

“… Yes, seat for one.”

She answered.

The waitress told Hiyuki that she could sit anywhere she wished, so Hiyuki went to her usual seat.

As expected, I can only meet Kazetani-kun in the second semester...

When the second semester starts, her distance with Ao will probably increase further.

Her body felt sluggish.

Hiyuki ordered chrysanthemum tea.

The teapot and cup were sent to her rather quickly. Hiyuki poured the golden liquid with the refreshing fragrance of flowers into the cup.

After I finish this… I should hurry back… It's almost time for my curfew...

She stared at the steam rising out of her cup.

Someone pulled the chair opposite her and sat down.

Hiyuki raised her head, and saw a man in his thirties who looked like a freelancer sitting there. Hiyuki was surprised.

"Hi, remember me?"

"... You are Kazetani-kun's uncle..."

"Right answer."

Having the roles of scriptwriter, producer and company representative, Ao's uncle looked at Hiyuki with a profound smile.

"I was thinking that I might meet girlfriend-chan if I come here, and hit the jackpot. I have something to tell you, girlfriend-chan."

"T-Thank you for taking care of me that day. But I am not Kazetani-kun's girlfriend."

Hiyuki bowed deeply, then said with her body slumped. Sakutarou gaze at her gently.

Ao and Sakutarou didn't look alike, but Sakutarou's gentle eyes reminded Hiyuki of Ao.

“Ao is great in judging manuscripts, but terrible in reading girls. From girlfriend-chan’s reaction, even a bystander like me knows what girlfriend-chan wants.”

Hiyuki felt her face heating up.

W-What I want…?

Hiyuki had a frantic expression and Sakutarou’s eyes suddenly showed a tint of sadness.

“Ara… Even if he noticed, he would lack confidence and be at a loss. That boy can take action for the sake of others, but if it was for himself, he would lack the courage to do so. His character is really suitable to be a main character.”

Sakutarou’s voice was gently knocked into Hiyuki’s chest.

Ahh, it’s true that Kazetani-kun is suitable to be a main character. Bright, just, impartial, ready to make friends, and would not hesitate to lend a helping hand to anyone.

He was as broad as the blue sky —

“If the main character is dallying, unable to move forward and stutters, I will let the heroine take the initiative.”

Sakutarou winked, then made a gesture of shooting at Hiyuki with his index finger.

Hiyuki’s heart skipped a beat.

Let the heroine take the initiative…?

“S-Sorry, I should be going.”

It was going to be curfew soon, so Hiyuki stood up hurriedly from her seat. She bowed to Sakutarou and left the cafe. Sakutarou who was supporting his face with his palm smiled and waved at her.

If the main character don’t move, then let the heroine take the initiative…? But, if I tell Kazetani-kun how I feel, he might feel troubled...

The uneasiness of not being suitable for Ao resurfaced in Hiyuki’s mind once again.

Kazetani-kun is like the vast and beautiful sky, but I am ──

She made it home before curfew. There was a letter in the mailbox, and Hiyuki picked it up.

“I’m home.”

She shouted into the mansion.

Her grandmother was probably inside the room, so no one answered Hiyuki. She took off her slipper and checked who the letter was for — and held her breath.

It’s the newcomer contest...

The evaluation sheet for the entry she submitted earlier was here.

My submission that was evaluated by Ao!

— I didn’t send it to the second round, but I feel that Hyonomiya-san’s work is really interesting. I wrote that in my evaluation sheet too, it would take a while before it is posted, please read it then.

Recalling Ao’s words, Hiyuki calmed her beating heart, opened the envelope to read the letter.

The contents include an explanation document and an A4 sized evaluation sheet. Hiyuki pulled out the evaluation sheet and read it.

Title: ‘The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero, demon king and the emperor of a harem paradise’

Pen name: Yoroisame

Overall: C+, not selected

Those were the first lines she saw.

In the past, in a five grades system, she either get a E or a D, but she got a C+ this time!

Just this fact was enough to move Hiyuki to the verge of tears—

She continued reading with bated breath.

Story: B

The story is structured really well, the attention paid to setting up the plot feels nice. In the traffic accident scene at the very beginning, the use of large fonts as an ending leaves a deep impression, and captivates me. This is a good point.

The part after the main character Radiance arrives in the different world and before he meets Sylvia and the others is a bit too long. I suggest condensing the description of this part, or make the pacing smoother. The 'twist' of Sylvia and Fiona being the same person is great, but too many hints were given to the readers and lowered the sense of surprise. I will advise hiding some of the information to achieve better results. It ended on a happy reunion, so having an event happen after that feels unnecessary.

Writing: B-

The writing made frequent use of varying font size, special characters, multiple punctuations, which is a joyous way of writing. The large font at the end of the opening scene felt really refreshing. Please cherish how you joyous feeling when writing in such a way and work hard to use this method more effectively. On the flip side, overusing this technique will make it hard to leave a deep impression, so please do so prudently.

Instead of long passages of dialogue, it would be better to insert descriptions of expression and movement, which will make the rhythm of the story easier to read. You have the basics of writing down, do try out other techniques of

expressing yourself.

Unlike any other evaluation sheet she received in the past, Hiyuki felt her throat and chest trembling as she read the comment written in gentle words.

She felt that Ao was saying these words to Hiyuki in a cheerful voice, which made her eyes moist.

— … Does my work really… have interesting parts?

— Yes,

— Your work isn’t perfect, the font size changes and punctuation is a little excessive, which might leave a bad impression, but there are good points too. If you can bring them out, you can definitely pass the first round of selection.

Character Setting: B+

All the female characters are cute and cheerful girls! If you can cut down the numbers a little, it would be easier for the readers to understand.

The main character Radiance is an excellent character who works hard. Radiance is always considerate of the people around him, and I can feel his serious and gentle demeanour.

There are too many shouting lines, these actions that are too conscious about humour feels dissonant, making it harder to understand the charm of

Radiance. During the scenes where Radiance is thinking seriously, the joking parts should not go overboard. If you describe Radiance's feelings in detail, the impression it leaves would be much better. He is a great character, please work harder to show the readers his charm.

— The main character of 'The lonely me came to an alternate world, becoming the hero, demon king and the emperor of a harem paradise' is very charming."

— Y-You jest.

— I'm not lying

In response to Hiyuki who didn't believe him at all, Ao said in a bright voice that the main character apologizing to the car owner who knocked him down made Ao think kindly of him.

When we started writing the manuscripts together, Kazetani-kun is always finding the good points in my story and complimenting me. For the parts that's not written well, she didn't refute or mock me, and just said that we should think together to better convey it to the readers...

— Hyonomiya is a manuscript submitter! Just write the things you like would do. I hope you can put some thoughts into how you can convey this feeling to the people reading your work.

He was always gentle.

He was always encouraging Hiyuki.

In earlier evaluation sheets, her main character that was criticized as failing resonate with the readers, unpleasant and self conceited. But Ao said he likes that character.

Originality: C+

Commercial potential: B-

Her heart pounded in her chest and her vision blurred. Hiyuki kept blinking her eyes as she read, and finally reached the overall comments column.

Overall comment

Setting the plot carefully in the most popular story type, designing characters the readers will like, uses puns, varying font size and special characters. I can tell that the author is enjoying herself. It is a work that shares these joyous feelings with the readers and bring about a smile.

The settings that seemed generic at a glance showed glimpses of the thought put in by the author, which is really appealing. Just like the main character Radiance, there is a gap between the appearance he put out in public and how he actually felt inside, I think this work is really meaningful.

‘I think this work is really meaningful.’

Hiyuki kept reading this part again and again.

Hiyuki always felt that Ao was admirable, and as broad as the blue

skies. He was unlike Hiyuki who was gloomy and dull, which made her depressed.

And so, Hiyuki gave up. She knew that she would never be a special girl to Ao.

But Ao found so many good points in Hiyuki’s work.

He complimented Hiyuki’s work saying it was ‘really meaningful.’

There are parts that has yet to mature, and couldn’t grasp the use of special techniques well. Too concerned about the view of the readers and cater to their taste too much, this needs to be improved. If these points improve in the future, the writing will get better and better. Please continue to write stories in your own style.

I look forward to reading your next work.

I await your next submission.

Tears dropped onto the words.

Seeing the warm words that were closely spaced together, Hiyuki’s tears kept falling.

エリシオン文庫 新
文章
B-
キャラクター
B+
オリジナリティ
C+
商業性
B-
総評

Her grandmother who was walking to the mansion from inside the mansion saw Hiyuki crying and opened her eyes in surprise.

“Hiyuki, what’s wrong?”

Hiyuki said in a trembling voice as her tears fell:

“G-Grandmother… There is someone I want to meet no matter what, can I go find him?”

“It is already passed your curfew, can you go tomorrow?”

Grandmother knotted her brow, and Hiyuki cried:

“I have to go now!”

She had to go right now, when her feelings were hyped up after reading Ao’s evaluation sheet.

Her courage will wilt tomorrow.

Grandmother maintained her serious expression and looked straight at Hiyuki.

“8pm, no later than that.”

Hiyuki replied:

“Thank you, grandmother.”

Hiyuki put the evaluation sheet back into the envelope, slot it into her bag, put her shoes on again and left the mansion. She rushed through the courtyard dyed red by the evening sun, headed for the gate and called Ao.

— I will let the heroine take the initiative.

Sakutarou's voice rang in her head, making Hiyuki feel anxious.

All this while, I have things I want to tell Kazetani-kun. If I don't say it now, I won't be able to say it ever again.

Subaru parted ways with Cyan, and Subaru returned to his old world.

All good things come to an end.

But —

But after the story ends, if Subaru wants to meet Cyan again and took action —

"Hyonomiya-san? What happened?"

After her call got through and hearing Ao's voice, Hiyuki said:

"Kazetani-kun, I will wait for you beside the swimming pool at school. Kazetani-kun, can you come?"

What happened to Hyonomiya-san!?

As the sun becomes dimmer and the scenery transition into night, Ao pedalled his bicycle hard. He was pushed along by Sakutarou and Aeka earlier in the day, and Ao didn’t read his manuscripts at home, and kept thinking about Hiyuki.

He put the phone on the floor and kept looking down at it, thinking to himself that he will call Hiyuki in ten minutes and ask if she wants to meet at the cafe. But ten minutes later, no, twenty minutes later —— When he was still hesitating, the phone suddenly rang.

It was Hiyuki.

He scrambled to pick up the phone, and heard an urgent voice.

—— I will wait for you beside the swimming pool at school.

What happened at the swimming pool?

Because Hiyuki only stated that she wanted him to go there, Ao could only rush down the stairs, charge out of his house and hurry there on his bicycle.

“The heroine probably made her move right?”

“Well, maybe Ao will display his guts too.”

Situated in a small alley, in the cafe where Ao and Hiyuki did their after school creative work project, Sakutarou and Aeka was spending their time leisurely.

After Hiyuki left the cafe, Sakutarou received a call from Aeka.

“The recording ended earlier than expected, I will come and meet you now.”

And they met here.

“I am really envious of Ao.”

It was a rare sight seeing Sakutarou complain to Aeka.

“Because he is spending his youth with a girl as pretty as Hyonomiya-san?”

“Well, I’m envious about that too but… that’s not all. That guy finds anything he reads to be interesting, and he means it. When I first started content creation, I am moved by everything I see, and find everything I read interesting and exciting. I will flip through manga magazines from cover to cover, and watch new animes in their entirety. All of that is interesting. But now, no matter what I watch, what I read, I don’t find them as interesting as before. I don’t want to admit it, but I feel really anxious and empty.”

Sakutarou supported his face with one hand as he said lazily. Aeka listened to him quietly.

“It will be over if I start droning on about how boring other people’s works are. That would be really ugly. Just imagining myself becoming like that makes me break out in goosebumps. If that is the only thing I can feel, I will quit the industry. The manuscripts that get to be read by Ao sure are fortunate. Ao read them with the feelings of joy and happiness, and found so many good points about them. It would be a problem if all readers are like Ao, the creators will lose their sense of tension. But I think it’s great that there are fortunate readers and fortunate manuscripts being read too.”

Sakutarou moved his hand that was supporting his head, rested his head on the table and complained:

“I don’t think I can be like Ao, and think everything is interesting. Ahhh, how frustrating. If I can read from Ao’s perspective and view the world with Ao’s eyes, what beautiful things I would see.”

Sakutarou muttered ‘damn it’, and pressed his forehead onto the table like a kid. Unlike him, Aeka used a more matured and warm voice than usual and said softly:

“Ao is Sakutarou’s aspiration right?”

“No, he is like the past me that is gone. From ten years ago.”

Sakutarou answered, and Aeka frowned:

“Why are you lying about your age, you are already an adult ten years ago right? And I saw Saku’s album from high school, you looked like a

thug, nothing like the cheerful Ao-kun.”

After finishing her complaints, Aeka reverted to her gentle voice.

“I can empathize with you on envying Ao-kun. Ao-kun is a healthy and pure child. I want to be like Ao-kun and accept everything with a kind heart look at everything with refreshing eyes and treat everyone gently…”

Aeka then reached out from gently and patted Sakutarou’s head of messy hair that was resting on the table.

“In Saku’s eyes, I must look really rigid and stiff.”

Aeka mumbled with a slightly bitter voice, and Sakutarou answered with his face still on the table:

“Wako is a good woman, it’s my heart that is corrupted.”

“Fufu, if not for that, we might have moved on from this stage that feels so fresh, and go onto the next phrase. Like air, something we cannot live without. Which are lovers that are like old couples. How about it? Saku, want to achieve this goal together?”

Sakutarou turned his head and looked up at Aeka. As he looked at Aeka’s bright smile, his lips curled into a smile too.

“That’s fine too.”

He muttered and pulled Aeka over and pecked her on the cheeks.

“Alright, I’m full of drive again, time to go home and work hard!”

Sakutarou stood up energetically, and Aeka said with a blushing intoxicated face.

“Idiot! The mood was great just now! I will definitely —— not break up with you again.”

She hugged Sakutarou tightly.

When the crimson sky gradually turned a translucent purple, Ao charged through the school gates on his bicycle.

The last scene of Subaru and Cyan’s story was like this too.

Subaru stood at the shore in the night as waves washed onto the beach, preparing to return to his original world. Cyan rushed to his side ——

Parking his bicycle beside the fence that surrounded the swimming pool, he could see Hiyuki’s figure on the other side of the fence.

Her long light brown hair was shining because of the rays of light from outdoors. A plain one piece dress covered her slender body, her skirt swaying slightly with the humid summer night wind, she looked just like a mermaid by the shore. Her eyes were looking down at the

rippling waters in the pool.

Hiyuki probably heard the sound of the bicycle pedals and lifted her head. Looking through the fence, she locked eyes with Ao, although her lips that had a mole beside it move, but no sound came out, just like the real mermaid princess. An anxious expression appeared on her petite face.

“What’s the matter, Hyonomiya-san?”

To the ears of Cyan who was running hard, Subaru’s voice sounded hoarse and unclear. Just like Cyan who wanted to rush to Subaru’s side before he leaves, Ao who bore the same feeling as he parked his bicycle and rushed to the fence, Hiyuki’s voice permeated the night air and entered Ao’s ears.

“Kazetani-kun… Thank you…!”

Under the shine of the street light, she stood beside the pool by herself. On the other side of the fence, Hiyuki shouted with a frowning face.

Her long hair shook as she shouted again and again with her misty eyes on Ao:

“I have always been meaning to thank you! Thank you for reading my work! Thank you for telling me it is interesting! Thanking for finding its good points! Thank you for listening to my wish and write together with me! Thanks to Kazetani-kun, I have confidence now! Thank you!”

Just like Subaru thanking Cyan. Subaru thought of all the wonderful moments he spent with Cyan, his heart filled with happiness as he expressed his thanks repeatedly. Hiyuki kept shouting like Subaru did.

Thank you, Kazetani-kun, thank you!

Thank you for changing me!

Thanking for treating me well!

In Ao’s eyes, the side of the swimming pool that was giving off a blue glow looked just like an underwater world.

He remembered that time he went to the aquarium with Hiyuki and his heart pounded as he approached her slowly, step by step.

— Liking a person not because he is charming… But find him charming because you like him?

— Either way is possible. When you think the other party is charming, that’s when you fell in love with him. Ahh, that’s foreshadowing too.

If you think the other party is speaking — That means…

Hiyuki kept her cute lips that had a mole beside it shut, fluttered her eyelashes, then walked to the fence. Hiyuki’s eyes, her long hair, fair face and thin lips all seemed to be translucent and sparkling.

That must mean —

Hiyuki grabbed the fence with her pale fingers.

Ao reached through the fence and touched Hiyuki’s icy fingers.

Her eyes that were as deep as the ocean looked closely at Ao.

Just like Subaru grabbing Cyan’s hand tightly in his last moment as he watched Cyan intently.

The instant he saw the lips with a mole beside it move, Ao spoke just like Cyan did, expressing his overflowing feelings to the person before him.

“Kazetani-kun, I love you.”

“Hyonomiya-san, I love you.”

— Cyan, I love you.

— Subaru, I really really love you.

The two of them held hands, and Subaru slowly vanished before Cyan who was speaking tearfully, with an incredibly happy smile on his lips.

When the sensation in her hands disappears gradually, Cyan shouted repeatedly: I really love you, I have always loved you! As he listened, Subaru returned to his original world.

That was the ending of the story crafted by Ao and Hiyuki.

But at this moment, Ao’s hand reached through the fence and held Hiyuki’s hand.

Feeling Hiyuki’s soft and warm hands, Ao saw Hiyuki opened her mouth with a mole beside it and her eyes that were filled with tears —— Her deep blue eyes sparkled under the moonlight and she smiled.

The dim night was like an underwater water world, the waves pushed by the wind were conveying their feelings to other party, as they watched each other.

Just like the sequel of Subaru and Cyan’s story ——

Even though they parted briefly, the two of them definitely can ——

Passing through the fence, Ao and Hiyuki’s face drew near each other. Hiyuki’s icy fingertips turned warm because of the heat from Ao.

And then——

Epilogue

Three months later.

November, deep into autumn.

After passing through rows of Ginkgos that had been dyed golden, Ao stopped his bicycle before the cafe in the alley and opened the door.

Hiyuki who was writing at the table besides the wall lift her head and smiled.

“Sorry, the committee meeting got extended, did you wait long?”

“Not at all.”

Hiyuki shook her head lightly. She was writing a new work that would be submitted in December.

After school, he will meet Hiyuki in this cafe to chat about light novels, and discuss the work she had written so far. They will go to places like cinemas or Planetarium occasionally too.

Their classmates refer to Hiyuki as ‘Ao’s girlfriend’, and Ao as ‘Hiyuki’s boyfriend’.

Neither of them denied it.

“The selection result for the entry you submitted in summer has been published on the web.”

Ao sat opposite Hiyuki and said cheerfully, Hiyuki showed a delightful face too.

“Yes, I… saw it too.”

She answered.

Watching her sparkling expression that was full of happiness, Ao returned the smile too.

“Congratulations on passing the first stage of selection.”

Afterword

Hello everyone, I am Mizuki Nomura. As the title implies, ‘Manuscript Screening Boy and Manuscript Submitting Girl: Watched over by the gentle sky, the story of the bashful ocean’ the main character of the story is a high school boy working as a manuscript screener.

When I worked as a screener for the first time, I was moved just like Ao was, amazed that there was such an extravagant job of making money just by reading novels! Making a living by reading manuscripts was such a wonderful thing, so I told the editor I knew:

“Please give the manuscript screening job to me! I love reading! It’s fine even if there are dozens! And of course, I will keep strictly to the deadline!”

I asked the editor, and took on screening jobs for ten serialization, and sent more than thirty prize winners to the second stage of selection.

Some serialization reject my screener application because I am a professional writer, but the most manuscripts I had screen was 200 in one month.

Buried in manuscripts, I felt excited thinking about which one I should screen next. I had fun reading it too, I feel so fortunate to have this job.

Even though I felt happy reading them, I am not good at writing the evaluation sheets, and spent a lot of time thinking about what to

write, mulling over it in front of the computer.

Submitters weren’t given evaluation sheets in the past, the trend started recently and was adopted by many serialization. With this change, the number of manuscripts I screen also decreases. If I don’t need to write evaluation sheets, I will want to read more manuscripts.

How about being the judge for the final round of selection? Although I was invited to do that, but it was too much to ask of me!

I took on the role of the screener for the second round twice, but every entry was interesting with great quality, it was really hard to make a choice, I was even thinking about it in my dreams. Just the second round is this hard, there is no way I can take on the heavy responsibility of the final selection. I couldn’t choose any other works except the ones that fit my taste.

I still prefer the work of the first round of selection. I have given this serious thoughts. I like the manuscripts that are full of flaws, passions and chaos.

And of course, when performing the first round of selection, I was also troubled by which work to send to the second round. However, just like Ao said, the works I send after much thought had never pass through the second round of selection. This became the foundation of my professional screening job.

Among the people reading this right now, there might be entry contestants who received an evaluation sheet written by me. Although my comments were shabby, I put in a lot of effort into writing it. If it was any help to you at all, I will be very glad.

The second half of this work was written while I was hospitalized.

I can remember the night before my surgery, I came to the corridors of the hospital where phone usage was allowed. I sat on the bench, put my laptop on my knees and typed under the dim lights until 3am.

The nurse said that I can work in this zone even after lights out, so I held to what she said and rushed my script here.

I always sleep and rise early, retiring to bed before 12am. But just for this night, I wanted to write as much as I could. Because I didn’t know if I could move my hands or body after the surgery, and there was no telling how much they need to cut off without doing the surgery.

In the quiet corridors, I will sometime hear loud construction like noises, were those the noise of surgeries? Were the doctors still working at this late hour?

Thankfully the evening after the surgery, my body still hurts, but my hand and fingers could still move. So I laid in bed and continue working.

The electric bed that allowed me to adjust the angle is really amazing~ With this, I can continue writing without getting down from bed. I wanted one and search for the catalogue after I was discharge. But I gave up the idea in the end… If I bought it, my sleeping hours will grow longer, and I will just become a lazier person.

Anyway, I finished the love story between the screening boy and submitting girl this way. It wasn’t a story about the publishing industry, but a tale about youth, so Ao and Hiyuki are normal kids.

Konoha from ‘Book Girl’ was bestowed with a talent that was not related to his will, and the fate to write stories. It was the same for Toko, who was a girl that couldn’t live on without reading.
<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_Girl>

However, Hiyuki didn’t have the talent for writing, and was an ordinary girl aside from her looks. She rediscover herself through her writing, expanded her world and changed gradually. I want to write a story like this, and so the story evolved this way. It was the same for Ao who gave suggestions to Hiyuki, he enjoys reading, but reading wasn’t equivalent to his life.

I gave a lot of thought about reading and writing because of the nature of my occupation, but I the experience would vary from person to person so it was fine.

Hiyuki project herself into her work, while others would separate their work from themselves like Sakutarou, and I feel that most professional authors were like him.

As for me, it could either way. However, when I wrote a piece that was completely not writing about myself and people ask: ‘Is the author speaking from her experience?’, I will feel troubled.

If everything is about my experience, then the scenes and plots would be planned really fast. The same for the character Ao, although I included my experience as a manuscript screener inside, but Ao’s thought wasn’t a hundred percent equivalent to mine. I hope everyone can understand that Ao and me have different opinions too.

The illustrations are done by Eihi-sensei. With just one colour illustration, you spurred boundless imagination, a really amazing illustrator. I like the unassuming Cyan, it makes me smile.

Next month, 22nd July, Shueisha Dash X Bunko will be retailing ‘Nefarious alliance of S and S’ Volume 1. You might be able to guess the direction the story will lead from the title, it is a memorable story and I hope everyone can take a look.

<TL: S と S の不埒な同盟>

‘Vampire’ volume 5 will be published at the end of August, I will be glad if everyone can purchase this book.

<TL: 吸血鬼になったキミは永遠の愛をはじめる”

Well then, let’s meet in ‘S and S’ next time.

18th May 2015 Mizuki Nomura

Every word the characters said about creative writing left a deep impression in my heart. It is my honour to be the illustrator for this book, Thank you.

Eihi

登場人物達の創作に対する
言葉ひとつひとつに脳をうた
れました。イラストを担当させて
いただく事ができて、とても
光栄でした。
ありがとうございました！